REBORN AS A
SPACE MERCENARY
I WOKE UP PILOTING THE STRONGEST STARSHIP!
NOVEL
2
WRITTEN BY
Ryuto
ILLUSTRATED BY
Tetsuhiro Nabeshima

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The gang enjoys a brewery tour, where they learn how fruit wine is made!
"Is the fruit itself alcoholic? Is that even possible?"
Hiro
"There you go. Open up."
"It still smells and tastes like it, though. I like it, but I think I would get drunk if I ate too much."
Elma
Mimi
REBORN AS A
SPACE MERCENARY
I woke up piloting the strongest starship!

Everyone's here for a medical examination, but what's this?!
"Now get to stripping and pick your pods. I'm used to naked specimens, so don't worry about me."
I was more worried about myself than Dr. Shouko, in truth.
Shouko
A doctor who works at Inagawa Technologies General Hospital. She seems cold and unapproachable at first, but thanks to her beauty and assets, she has a lot of secret fans. Shouko seems to have noticed something about Hiro's DNA...

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NOVEL 2

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Airship

Seven Seas Entertainment

MEZAMETARA SAIKYO SOBI TO UCHUSEN MOCHI DATTA NODE,
IKKODATE MEZASHITE YOHEI TOSHITE JIYU NI IKITAI Vol.2
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First published in Japan in 2020 by
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Seven Seas press and purchase enquiries can be sent to Marketing Manager Lianne Sentar at press@gomanga.com. Information regarding the distribution and purchase of digital editions is available from Digital Manager CK Russell at digital@gomanga.com.

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ASSOCIATE PUBLISHER: Adam Arnold
PUBLISHER: Jason DeAngelis

ISBN: 978-1-64827-444-2
Printed in Canada
First Printing: November 2021
10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Prologue

DAZZLING LIGHT AWOKE ME. A glowing, technicolor hallway stretched out into the distance. Far ahead lay our destination—no more than a fragile, tiny gleam. A single star on the horizon.

"Hey. You're not *asleep*, are you?" someone grumbled behind me.

Whose voice was that? Where even am I?

A holographic display contained information about this strange flight. A steering column sat before me, equipped with more buttons and gauges than I could wrap my head around. I studied that crazy light corridor outside the windows. It seemed to go on forever, but maybe it was just a display too? Nah, it looked way too realistic to be a video.

"Master Hiro?" The next voice was more worried than angry.

Master Hiro? My name is Satou Takahiro. Still, why does that voice sound so familiar?

Footsteps padded toward me.

"Ouch?!" Something smacked me in the head.

"You've got some nerve, napping in the cockpit."

"E-Elma, violence is bad."

I turned, holding my aching head. Two women stood before me—one angry, one worried, just like their voices.

"Oh!" I gasped. "Now I remember."

"Remember what?"

Elma. That was the pissed-off one. Long, tapered elf ears poked up out of her fine, silver hair. Those pale locks accentuated her fair skin, slim figure, and modest chest. Despite her elfin appearance, she was decked out in high-tech merc gear from head to toe and kept a laser gun on her hip. Really, the ears were the most elf-like thing about Elma.

She'd ended up on this ship through an unfortunate accident. During a large-scale pirate crackdown, her ship had gone on a rampage and had

almost destroyed itself crashing into an imperial vessel. I'd paid off the steep penalty she faced, but it left her so deeply in debt to me that she was working on my ship to pay it off.

"I remember…stuff about you two…and other stuff," I answered.

"Did you forget about us?" the girl hiding behind Elma asked, looking crestfallen.

"No, no, I'm just too sleepy to think," I said.

The other girl was Mimi, a bubbly woman with light-brown hair and eyes. She hid adorably behind Elma, which sadly meant I couldn't see much of her impressive chest. If Elma was modest in that area, Mimi was downright outrageous, like a light cruiser compared to a battleship.

Like Elma, Mimi had fallen on some hard times before becoming a member of this crew. She too had ended up in debt, but in her case, it was due to her parents' unfortunate deaths. I paid her debt to the colony and gave the poor girl a place on my ship, where she could be safe from life on the streets.

Mimi's debt didn't really seem like her fault. Something about the outrageous fees stank of bureaucracy. The colony blamed her parents, but that didn't check out with me. After silencing a nasty public servant with a wad of cash, I spirited her away from her colony. The whole thing was an unpleasant affair, and I was glad to get Mimi out of there. With the money I earned as a mercenary, I could have easily just supported Mimi on my own, but it didn't hurt to give her a job on the ship. Thus, she was training to be an operator in charge of our communications.

"Sleepy or not, it's just plain cruel to forget your own crewmates," Elma said. "Especially after you keep taking turns with us."

"Taking turns? That's not a nice way of describing it," I said.

"It's true, though."

"Well, I can't deny that."

I had a…certain kind of relationship with Elma and Mimi.

There was a lot about this universe I didn't quite get: customs, habits, laws, and so on. So much remained inscrutable to me as a Japanese man.

One of the weirdest customs I'd learned was that women on a man's ship were instantly seen as his mistresses.

Weird, right? It was weird to me too, but what could I do? I was still learning about this place and all its customs, so for now, I had to just go with the flow.

Besides, both Mimi and Elma had joined my crew knowing full well what it meant. I was their best option, and it wasn't like I'd offered to help just to get in their pants. I truly did want to rescue both of them and build up my crew in the meantime.

Little did I know my kind offers were basically propositions. It didn't matter what I intended—that was what they heard, and they were both in such dire straits that refusing my offer would leave their lives and bodies in grave danger. Mimi would have been stuck in the slums, passed around by thugs like a toy until she was discarded in some miserable back alley. Elma wouldn't have fared much better. If she failed to pay her debt, they would have sent her to a prison colony full of former space pirates eager to get their hands on a pretty little mercenary like her.

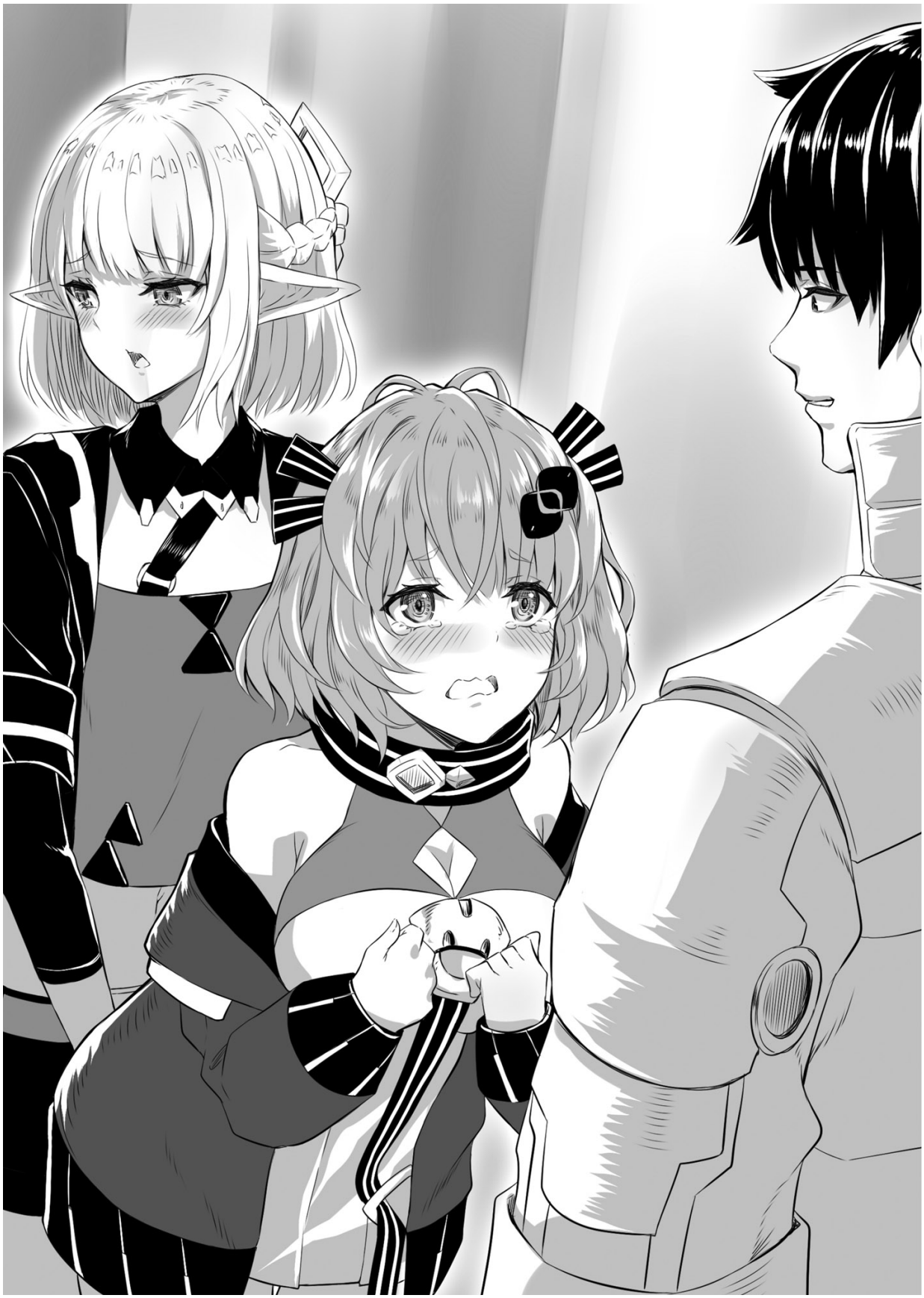
So, really, they didn't have many appealing options when I made my offers. That was how we kind of all ended up in a relationship together. You might accuse me of being a monster just trying to use them for sex and, well, I can't entirely disagree. But hey, they offered themselves freely to me. Would anyone really say no to a cute little shorty and a fiery elf?

Yeah, didn't think so.

I was no saint. I tended to think with my junk at times like these; no monuments would be erected to honor *my* pure intentions. I was the kind of guy who always picked the sexy options in video games. Sorry, not sorry.

I began, "Well, if you don't like being with me—"

"Nobody said that," Elma interrupted. She turned away, but not quickly enough to hide the flush in her cheeks.



“I like it,” Mimi said, blunt and earnest as ever.

“As do I,” I said. “I love you girls.”

“I love you too!” Mimi chirped.

“Y-yeah, yeah,” Elma muttered.

Mimi beamed at my words, while Elma went on scowling. *Aww, they’re so cute.*

***

Well, it’s about time I properly introduce myself. My name is Satou Takahiro, but people in this world know me as Captain Hiro. Might be because I pilot the only ASX-08 Krishna battleship in the whole universe. My Krishna, I call her.

Right now, we were cruising in that very Krishna along the hyperlane that linked the Garnam and Arein systems. It was one of the most common ways of traveling in this universe, where humanity had left its home far behind to explore the vast potential of every star and planet on the endless horizon.

Waking up in a sci-fi universe like that was quite the shock. I came to right here in the Krishna, which I only recognized because it was a ship I’d piloted in a video game. That’s right: before waking up here, I was just some guy who played too much *Stella Online*, a space game where I could fly around fighting, trading, and making money however I liked.

The reality was quite different. Here, Krishna was one of a kind. Sure, a lot of things about this universe were similar to that of *Stella Online*—like the ships and products from the game—but there were a number of differences too. While I still had to battle space pirates, all-consuming crystal life-forms and other baddies, none of the star systems on my Galaxy Map matched the ones I knew from *Stella Online*. There were also a bunch of empires controlling things here that I’d never even heard of in the game.

Confusing didn’t even begin to describe it. In the game, no player had even reached the center of the galaxy, and that meant I had no way to know

for sure if this was the same universe or not. It could have simply been so huge that I hadn't seen this part of it yet. When I checked Earth's Solar System, for example, I came up totally empty-handed. That didn't mean much since the players of *Stella Online* hadn't found that system yet either.

I figured the best thing I could do after finding myself here was kick back and enjoy it. I had the Krishna, and I could still pilot it. Plus, I had some cash from my in-game life as a mercenary. Might as well make the most of it, right?

It was easy enough to fall back on being a mercenary here as well. With the help of Mimi and Elma, I knocked out scores of space pirates and even played hero during a major galactic scuffle waged by two warring empires.

All that hard work drew some unfortunate attention, though. Lieutenant Serena was as beautiful as she was dangerous, and she had her eye on me for recruitment. That was how we'd ended up in this hyperlane—we were running from Serena and the rest of the colony. I chose the mercenary life in order to be a free agent, after all. I didn't want to get tied down to the Imperial Fleet. They could complain all they wanted, but I was keeping my freedom.

Besides, I had bigger dreams.

Where did all this fighting lead? For me, hopefully, a nice residential neighborhood on a safe planet. I wanted to get myself a freestanding house with a yard, most importantly so I could taste the sweet nectar of carbonated soda again. I know that sounds crazy, but can you believe there's no carbonated soda anywhere in this universe? It's outrageous! A home was my only path toward getting soda again.

Buying a house wouldn't be cheap, though. For one thing, I'd need landowner rights in the Grakkan Empire. That quickly skyrocketed the price into the hundreds of millions of Ener. That kind of money would take some time to earn, so I might as well enjoy the universe in the meantime.

The girls had their own goals as well. Mimi wanted to savor all the flavors of the galaxy. While she had her sights set on all the delicious, weird, wonderful food the universe had to offer, I secretly hoped to add carbonated soda to her list of conquests.

Finally, Elma wanted to buy back her independence. That entailed repaying her steep debt of 3,000,000 Ener—or 300,000,000 yen—to me. No mean sum. She'd already made 260,000 Ener from our last battle, meaning she might be able to pay back her debt in a year. However, that wouldn't get her a new ship, so she'd need more than that 3,000,000 Ener to truly regain her freedom.

And that was how this motley crew all ended up on their way to the Arein System, a place renowned for advances in medical technology. I had no idea what we'd encounter there. In fact, everyone in this universe believed I'd lost my memory entirely during a hyperdrive accident. The truth was that I knew nothing about this universe except what was in *Stella Online*. I couldn't exactly tell people I was living out a video game, though. Still, that cover story about the memory loss worried Mimi and Elma, hence our decision to head for a system with good medical equipment.

Unfortunately, I couldn't exactly refuse the treatment. That would only look more suspicious. And maybe there really was something wrong with me. I mean, I still didn't know how I'd ended up in this place to begin with.

In summation, we'd made our way to the Arein System in search of freedom and medical tech. Yes, *just* freedom and medical tech. Nothing else, especially not because I was fleeing from a crazy lieutenant with her eyes on me. Nope, not at all.

Chapter 1:
The Arein System's Trading Colony

"HM, LET'S SEE," Mimi said. "The Arein System contains two habitable planets, three research colonies, and one trading colony."

She went on to describe how the system thrived thanks to export of its high-tech goods, made possible by its large-scale import of materials. This produced a steady stream of merchant ships, which, in turn, brought about a steady stream of space pirates. Even with the Empire protecting them, the Arein System was simply too large to shield completely. After all, it didn't have large asteroid belts like the Tarmein System did. A few of those pirates always slipped through, and that was where we'd find our mercenary work.

"And that's a summary of the Arein System," Mimi concluded.

"Bravo!" She blushed furiously as I applauded. "So, what colony should we go to?"

"Research colonies typically do not admit people other than researchers and management, so we should go to the trading colony," she said.

"If we ordered stuff at a trading colony," Elma chimed in, "then we could visit a research colony while it's delivered. It's not exactly a party, though. Not much sightseeing to do in those places."

"Sounds stuffy to me," I grumped. "Do the people who live there hate fun or something?"

"Stations like that are full of brainiacs who enjoy researching," Elma said.

"Eww." I felt bored just imagining all those workaholics who saw research as a hobby. I wouldn't last a day in a dull place like that. "Elma, let's set our sights on the trading colony instead."

"Aye-aye, Captain." Elma, sitting in the copilot's seat, wheeled the Krishna around to face the trading colony. "It'll be about fifteen minutes

until we're there."

"Gotcha. Let's stay on guard. Mimi, keep an eye out for any strange signals on the radar."

"Yes, sir!"

Mimi trained her sights on the hyperspace sensors. They kept working during FTL travel, unlike normal sensors. Don't ask me how it worked; I didn't really understand any of this hyperspace stuff. All that mattered to me was that those sensors gave us a good view of everything around us. We could pick up other ships, bits of debris, or even distress signals.

Which was exactly what Mimi found. "Excuse me, Master Hiro? I've located a distress signal."

"Whoa, seriously?" I cried. "That's super rare."

"We need to go help them," Elma said.

It might be fine to ignore mini events like this in *Stella Online*, but that wouldn't fly here. We had a duty to rush to the rescue and a reputation to maintain.

"Right. Turn us toward the source of the signal," I ordered. "We might have to fight, so make sure you're ready."

"Yes, sir!" Mimi shouted.

"Gotcha," Elma said.

We pointed the Krishna right at the distress signal. I had no idea what we'd find. Such signals were extremely unusual and usually only used when a ship had a major malfunction or was under attack. We could be heading toward a simple tow job…or a full-on shoot-out.

"We'll make contact soon," Elma said. "Disabling FTL drive in five, four, three, two, one… Now!"

Boom! A roar rippled out as Elma shut down the FTL drive and eased the ship into normal space. Immediately, five ships popped up on the radar, one medium-sized with four smaller ones chasing it down. Welp, it looked like we had our answer.

“They’re under attack,” Elma reported. “It looks like the victim is a medium passenger ship.”

“That one sent the signal,” I said. “Let’s intervene. Mimi, scan them and make contact.”

“Yes, sir!” she replied. “This is the mercenary battleship Krishna. We’ve received your distress signal. To the ships of unknown affiliation attacking the passenger ship, we demand you stop at once.”

“They’re targeting us,” Elma said.

That was one way to respond to Mimi’s command. The unknown ships already had their weapon systems powered up. All they had to do was lock on to us, and we’d be toast.

“They’re definitely hostile,” I muttered. “Bring weapon systems online and increase generator output to battle mode.”

“Aye-aye,” Mimi said. “Weapon systems online. Increasing output.”

“Let’s go!” I shouted.

The ship whirred and shifted around us, deploying four weapon arms bearing heavy laser cannons. Two more cannons extended from either side of the cockpit, gleaming dully in the light from the other ships.

“All four of those small ships have bounties,” Mimi said.

“Then we can crush them without hesitation,” I said.

Two of the four small craft peeled off to charge our way. I launched the Krishna right at them, accelerating as we went.

“This guy’s fast!” one of them cried.

The second we got in range, I unleashed all four heavy laser cannons at the ships. They didn’t even get a chance to fire before their shields faltered.

“Gah? My shields?!”

I started my count. “One down.”

As I swept past the first ship, I unloaded my flak cannons, punching through that unshielded ship. The high-speed, small debris of the flak

cannons worked best at close range like this, turning the enemy into Swiss cheese after one brutal round of firing.

Elma shuddered. “Those shard cannons are as terrifying as ever.”

“Shard cannon is such a fancy way to say it,” I said.

“Fancy? What?”

Even while we chatted, I turned the ship to point all four cannons at the next unfortunate enemy to cross our path.

“Fire, fiiire!”

Lasers sliced through the pirate ship, melting its shields and thrusters.

“C-cut it out!” the enemy yelped.

“No.” Maybe they went on begging, but I wasn’t listening. Space pirates like these stole from transport ships, hijacked passenger vessels, slaughtered entire crews, and sometimes even dabbled in the slave trade. Trash like them didn’t deserve any mercy. I showered the pirate in heavy laser fire. Within moments, his ship exploded in a fiery bloom.

“That’s two. Next!” This was getting downright fun.

“Two ships left. Looks to me like they’re running away, though,” came Elma’s report. They must have gotten spooked by seeing their comrades so swiftly dispatched.

“Hey, you! Get back here!” I barked.

“Nah, I ain’t gettin’ near a monster like you!” one of the pirates snapped, beating a hasty retreat. He’d already put a good amount of distance between me and his ship.

“Space pirate ships have activated faster-than-light drive!” Mimi said.

“We’ve gotta catch them!” I punched the acceleration, dashing after the fleeing pirates. *Just a little farther and they’ll be in laser range!*

“Later!” the pirates said.

Boom! The pirate ships flashed into streaks of pure light. We could potentially still chase them, but it would leave that passenger ship stranded.

“Dammit!” I cursed. “They’re fast.”

“They sure knew when to quit,” Elma said. “I guess some of them aren’t complete idiots.”

“Well, I’d prefer if they were idiots.” If only they’d been in shooting range, I could have still dropped them. A longer-range gun, like an electromagnetic railgun, would have kept me on their tails. “Whatever. Get us connected to the passenger ship. If they think they’ll be fine on their voyage, we can start rummaging for loot.”

“We don’t *have* to escort them,” Elma reminded me.

Cold, but true. They hadn’t asked for an escort, just a rescue. We’d get a reward either way at this point. Receiving that distress signal obligated us to them, but it also meant they owed us our due reward. How much? Well, that depended on what they were carrying and who they were. Typically, a medium-sized ship like this one was a decent payout. Not two minutes in this system and already, we were making money. Nice!

A voice crackled over the communication line Mimi had opened. “We are a passenger ship under Inagawa Technologies: the Koueimaru. Thank you for saving us.”

Inagawa Technologies and the Koueimaru, huh? They sound like a Japanese firm. I wonder how you would write that name in kanji.

“I’m just glad to see you’re safe, Koueimaru. I’m Captain Hiro, mercenary. How’s your ship doing?”

“Our life support systems are safe, but our undercarriage is ruined. I’m sorry to ask you this, but could you protect us until imperial ships arrive?”

Protect them, huh? We might have been able to tow a smaller ship, but not one this size. Guess we were on guard duty now.

“Can we call that an official request?” I asked. “Do I get a reward?”

“Yes, of course. Inagawa Technologies will compensate you. We can negotiate the exact amount back at headquarters. I don’t have the authority to make that kind of decision.”

So he was the captain, but his power was still pretty limited. I glanced over at Elma, who nodded. Done deal.

“Understood. We will now begin guarding your ship, and we will be done once the imperial ships arrive. Inagawa Technologies will pay the rescue and protection rewards. Does that sound all right?”

“Yes, that will do.”

“Sounds good to us. Mimi, log that conversation just in case.”

“Yes, sir!”

I guess we might as well fish around in those wrecked ships, then. Though I doubt I’ll get much, since I crushed them before they could steal anything.

***

“Wooow, it’s so big!” Mimi marveled.

“That it is,” I agreed. “How many Tarmein Primes could fit in here, do you think?”

Elma scratched her head. “Um, I think they say five times as many people can live here? That doesn’t tell you much about the size, though.”

An enormous colony loomed ahead. The cuboctahedron rotated slowly, perhaps to create artificial gravity within that massive structure.

This big boy’s name was Arein Tertius. We’d traveled all the way out here for this colony in particular, just the third one ever built in the Arein System.

“Mimi, send a docking request,” I said.

“Oh! Yes, sir. I’ll send it now.” Mimi worked the console, providing our ship’s name, captain’s name, and reason for arriving. “We’ve been granted permission! They want us to go to the seventy-second hangar.”

“Gotcha.”

I switched on the auto-docking function and let the ship follow the guide beacons to our designated hangar. Such an enormous colony saw a ton of traffic, meaning any little collision could turn into a major disaster. Better to just let the Krishna handle this one.

“Jeez, auto-docking? That’s just heresy,” Elma said.

“I like things to be easy,” I said. Sure, I could show off, but why bother right now? With the auto-docking installed on the ship, the only real concern was some idiot barreling into us.

We eased into the dock and I switched our generator to anchored mode. No need to waste the power supply now that we were there.

“Well, here we are!” I said. “Now what? Should we go out for some grub first?”

“It’s a little early for that,” Elma replied. “I think we should just finish our routine tasks first.”

“Okay. So we sell our loot, visit Inagawa Technologies, and grab our bounties at the Imperial Fleet’s office?”

“I will take care of selling the loot.” Mimi clenched her fists eagerly. She’d become an expert on how to navigate her terminal and find the best prices by comparing markets.

“Cool, so Mimi can sell off our loot. Next, Inagawa Technologies.”

“We might be better off waiting for them to contact us first,” Elma said. “We have no need to rush.”

Fair enough; they knew how to contact us and our affiliation, after all.

“Then how about we go to the Imperial Fleet’s office to grab those bounties?” I proposed.

“Want me to go instead?” Elma said. I had no doubt she could handle the task, but it might go smoother if I did it just because I was the registered captain of this ship.

“Nah. It’s best if the captain goes,” I said.

“I’ll at least go with you,” she pressed. “It’s dangerous to go alone.”

“I’m not a kid…”

I don’t really know anything about this place, though. It could be risky to walk around on my own. Plus, two guns are better than one.

“Sure,” I said. “Let’s go together. We can take a look around the city too. Mimi, stay in the ship; this is the safest place for you to be.”

“Is this colony that dangerous?” Mimi asked.

“They have a lot of security,” I said, “but we don’t really know how safe this place is. There are clearly a ton of people coming and going. No guarantee they’re all good guys.”

“Yep,” Elma chimed in. “Typically, districts with more outsiders are inconsistent when it comes to safety. That’s all a part of gathering info.”

Mimi nodded. “I see.”

Elma and I would be fine when it came to self-defense, but little Mimi didn’t have experience in that area. She kept a laser gun with her, but she’d never had to use it in the heat of the moment.

“That settles it,” I said. “Elma and I will take care of this. We’ll call you if we think it’ll take a while, but if we do, you’re free to eat without us.”

“Okay. Be careful, you two.”

“Of course,” I replied.

“Yup,” Elma said. “See ya.”

Thus, Elma and I left the ship and headed into Arein Tertius.

***

I let out a laugh. “Ha ha. It seems a little different here.”

“Yeah, this place is way more urban than Tarmein Prime.”

A jungle of skyscrapers awaited us on Arein Tertius. High-rises packed the colony, streetlights marching down the alleyways between them. They provided all of the light for the colony. Due to Arein Tertius’s design, no natural light pierced this city of eternal night.

“It can’t be good for your health to have so little light,” I mused.

“I hear the people here take regular artificial sun baths,” Elma said.

“That sounds…well, actually, no. I guess we do that every day too.”

“Yep, in our medical pod.”

Living on a ship meant most mercs didn’t get much natural sunlight. Our medical pods not only performed vitals checks but also provided us with artificial sun baths. I assumed it was some sort of fancy ultraviolet light.

“Seems like it’d be a pain to walk on foot everywhere. How do people get around?”

“Look over there.” Elma gestured at an entrance that led downward. “There’s an underground transportation system that can take you anywhere in the colony. Remember the distribution system on Tarmein Prime? This is that, but on a large scale.”

“Oh, I get it.” Any time we went to a shop back on Tarmein Prime, our purchases always made it back to the ship before we did, thanks to that distribution system Elma mentioned. I had to wonder what it felt like to zip through that network of tubes. “Do we need to use it right now?”

“Nope. The Imperial Fleet’s post is very close by.”

“That’s a shame. Maybe I’ll get the chance later.” How close was Inagawa Technologies? Failing that, we’d need groceries and other essentials eventually. *There’s still a chance!*

“There. The imperial post.” Elma waved at a building flying the flags of the Empire and its fleet. It looked more like an office building than any kind of military post.

“Not very imposing,” I commented.

“Yeah, this one’s pretty plain. Some posts have a bit more going on. When the colony can spare the land, they’ll even set up training grounds.”

This was definitely not one such post. There wasn’t even a guard at the door, just a turret-slash-security camera. *I guess the Imperial Fleet likes to automate labor where they can.*

A security gate stopped us the moment we entered the building. A bulky macho man stood imposingly before it with a laser turret behind him as backup.

“We do not allow visitors to bring weapons into this military post,” the clerk said. “Please leave them here before you enter.”

“Sure.”

“Already on it,” Elma said.

Elma and I handed over our laser guns and backup energy packs. The clerk put us through a full-body scan nonetheless and checked our identities on our handheld terminals.

“The check is complete,” the clerk said. “If you wish to collect bounties, head to that counter. If you need anything else, try the next one over.”

“Thanks.”

We headed to the counter. I was used to this kind of thing from my time on Tarmein Prime, but this time, there were no sentries with lasers at every entrance.

“Welcome to Arein Tertius. You seem to be new here.” A gentle-looking man greeted us at the counter. I guessed he was a bit older than me —maybe in his late thirties or early forties.

“Yeah, we just landed. I’m Captain Hiro, and this is my crew member, Elma. We have another crewmate named Mimi back at the ship.”

“Hiro and Elma, got it. I’m Sergeant Daniel, but my rank is of little importance to mercenaries, so Daniel or even Danny is perfectly fine.”

I shook my head. “Nah, I think I’ll go with Sergeant Daniel. Never hurts to be polite, right?”

“Sergeant Daniel sounds good to me,” Elma added.

“Is that so? Well, that’s perfectly acceptable,” Sergeant Daniel said. “Now, you must be here to collect bounties, yes? Quite the diligent workers you are, to come here immediately after landing.”

“We actually received a distress signal on our way to this colony,” I explained. “When we went to check it out, it was a ship from Inagawa Technologies being attacked by space pirates. We couldn’t let them get hurt.”

“Really? Inagawa Technologies? Is the crew safe?”

“We made it just in time. My ship couldn’t tow them, so we called some imperial ships in to do it. Since we got here first, we figured we’d have to wait a while.”

“I see. Well, as long as our ships are with them, they have nothing to fear. You’ve done well, Hiro.”

Sergeant Daniel’s pursed lips lifted into a smile as I spoke. I could already tell this guy could worm his way into anyone’s heart over time.

“Yeah. I’m just glad someone could help them. So, about those bounties…” I said.

“Oh, yes, of course. Hold on just a moment. You will receive… 15,000 Ener for the two ships.”

“Jeez, that’s a lot,” I said.

“Those four ships have been terrorizing private crafts lately,” Sergeant Daniel said. “They like to hit and run, so we’ve had a tough time pinning them down. Now that you’ve taken out two of them, they may just lie low for a while.”

“I see…” This wasn’t quite adding up. The cargo of those pirate ships was pretty barren for such prolific pests—nothing but food and alcohol. Maybe they had a base nearby?

“The bounty transfer is complete,” Sergeant Daniel informed me. “Will you be staying here for a while?”

“Yeah, that’s the plan. A thriving colony like this has plenty of stuff to see, I bet.”

“It does, sir. We have high-tech businesses all over the place, and merchants stop by often. You won’t find any lack of recreation.”

“Really? Sounds like fun. Well, I guess we should get going.”

“Very well. Enjoy your stay.”

It seemed like we were well on our way to finding success in this colony. We recovered our lasers at the security gate and left the imperial post behind.

I turned to Elma as we headed back. “That guy was pretty pleasant, wasn’t he?”

“He didn’t look like the military type at all. Maybe he trained to have a job like that instead of being a soldier.”

“Really? So the military will actually train support staff?”

In my limited experience, the military’s organizational structure was utterly incomprehensible. In this universe, there was no need for armies suited to land, air, or sea. Every battle was fought in space, which probably meant a lot of reorganization from those older ways of waging war. I couldn’t begin to fathom how it all worked, let alone how support staff factored into the whole equation.

“Anyway,” Elma said, “you really have to wonder about what he said.”

“About the pirates we finished off? Their cargo was a little lacking, wasn’t it?”

“Definitely. They must have stashed the real goods somewhere else.”

“Yeah. But a four-ship squad…”

“They’re a small operation. I doubt we’ll find them.” Elma grinned wryly and shrugged. We might be able to ferret out a pirate base on an asteroid or something, but it was just as likely they threw their loot in a sturdy container and let it float somewhere in the vastness of space. That kind of thing was impossible to find without coordinates. “*Meh,* I say we forget about it. Maybe we’ll get lucky.”

“Next time, they’re not getting away.”

“That’s the spirit. Wanna go back to the ship and eat? Mimi’s waiting for us.”

I was down for that. “Sure.”

We strolled back at a leisurely pace. We didn’t face any urgent need for work, money, or supplies. In fact, we could spend the next day or two just kicking back before we had to worry about work again at all.

***

“Welcome back!” Mimi greeted us.

“Yep,” I replied. “Back we are.”

“Hey, Mimi,” Elma said.

Mimi perked up from where she sat with her tablet in hand.

“Studying something?” I asked.

“Yes. I was looking for the medical center with the best reputation.”

“Gotcha. Did you find anything?”

“I’ve only just started searching, so not yet,” she said. “I’m trying to avoid thinking that more expensive equals better. Considering your situation, I was wondering if we should look for one that focuses on the nervous system or the mind.”

Ah, right, my “memory loss.” I was perfectly healthy aside from that little quirk. Well, probably. Unless my body back home in Japan was stuck in some sort of coma and that was how I’d come here. I still thought and felt like the Satou Takahiro of Japan. The Krishna should have been a figment of my imagination, a dream that humanity might someday achieve as we explored space.

“Sticking with that memory loss story, huh?” Elma twisted her lips in an expression of pure skepticism. In her mind, I was a spoiled rich kid just running away from home.

That belief was pretty much my fault. At some point, I’d asked Elma if there were any “normal” meat and veggies we could buy. You see, most people here ate synthetic food made of algae and krill. “Normal” meat and veggies were a luxury enjoyed by super-rich aristocrats, so it was only natural that she’d doubt me after that. I couldn’t exactly prove her wrong either. I had no idea how I ended up here, after all. Yes, it was like *Stella Online*, but it wasn’t the same. I just had too few memories to go by.

“Since my memories are all screwed up, I say we should get a comprehensive medical exam,” I said. “I don’t know if I’m missing vaccines or anything, so we should probably get everything checked out.”

“That is a good idea,” Mimi agreed.

“*I’m* fine,” Elma chimed in, “but you should get examined while we’re there, Mimi. There are lethal diseases out there that only affect humans. You both might need more vaccines.”

“Are you sure you’ll be fine, Elma?” I said.

“I already have all of my vaccinations,” she said with a shrug.

But I shook my head and insisted. “I’ll pay, so let’s get you an exam too. It’s a captain’s duty to keep track of his crew’s health. Same goes for you, Mimi.”

“Yes, sir.”

“You sure?” Elma asked. “Well, if you’re paying, why not?”

Good. We can all get checked out this way.

It would be less lonely going as a group. Not that I was scared of hospitals or anything. Besides, like I said, it was my job to keep my crew members safe. If I could reduce their health risks just by spending a little bit of money, that was well worth the price.

“How much do you think it’ll cost?” I asked.

“I have no idea,” Elma said. “One person probably wouldn’t cost more than 1,000,000 Ener, I guess.”

“All right. That sounds okay to me.” Even if it cost 1,000,000 per person, I had 10,000,000 in savings. A painful expense, but one I could endure for the sake of everyone’s health. Still, that was something like 100,000,000 yen back in Japan. The fact that I thought of that as cheap kinda scared me.

“Master Hiro, 1,000,000 Ener is…” Mimi protested.

“You can’t just brush off 1,000,000 Ener with ‘sounds okay to me,’ y’know,” Elma said.

“Yeah, I know. As soon as I spoke, I knew it wasn’t gonna happen.”

“Good,” Elma replied.

Whatever the cost, I would be mentally prepared for it.

***

With the medical stuff aside, it was time for a good ol' lazy day. We set up the Steel Chef 5 to whip us up a delicious meal, took turns in the bath, and just relaxed. Normally, I might have worked out before my bath, but today was for resting.

"Sooo sleepy…" I groaned.

Elma scoffed. "You're such a lazybones."

"That's quite the thing to say when you're resting on me." I was lying on my back in bed while Elma leaned against me, toying with her terminal. A real battle of the laziest.

"Fair enough. I guess it's not bad to rest once in a while."

"Absolutely."

To be honest, it was more than "once in a while" for Elma. She almost treated me like a big dog. If I sat down, she'd put her head in my lap. If I was lying around, she'd come snuggle up beside me, always seeking that casual affection.

I had to admit, I liked it. Elma seemed calm at those times, more relaxed. It felt nice just having her there at my side.

"Looks like we've got a buyer for the stuff Mimi put up for sale," she announced.

"Ooh, nice. How much did we get?" I said.

"Subtract the handling fee, and we get 4,500 Ener. Adding that to the bounties makes a total profit of 19,500 Ener."

"Okay. 3 percent of that makes your portion…585 Ener?"

"And Mimi gets 98 Ener."

"Dang, that's not much."

"That's just how it is," Elma said. "We're not gonna rake in 8,000,000 Ener every battle. Your cut is 18,817 Ener."

"Nice. By the way, don't worry about rushing to pay me back."

Elma blinked down at me. "Aren't you supposed to want it back as soon as possible?"

"Meh. I'd really prefer having you here over the money."

I really did value having Elma around, and not just thanks to her beauty. She helped round out the Krishna's crew and provided much-needed support when I was in the captain's chair. Plus, she and Mimi had grown close as well.

"Don't worry about that," Elma reassured me. "We're in this for the long haul, buddy. I gotta pay you back, and I need the money to buy a whole new ship." She flopped onto my stomach.

Nice try, but I've been hitting the training room every day. You might be expecting squish, but there's a six-pack under there.

"Hey, I feel you flexing," she grumbled. "I can't sleep here if your muscles are hard."

"Oh, my bad."

"Mm, there you go. That's good." Evidently, Elma wasn't a fan of rock-hard abs. She snuggled in closer, content with the softness. "For real, though…"

"Hm?"

"You're lying about the memory loss, right?"

"Nooope."

"Jeez, you're not even trying anymore." She shook with laughter. "I'm not gonna pry if you don't want me to. Should I stop asking?"

"Hm… It's not like that. More like, you'd think I was insane."

"What's that mean?"

I guess it's not that big of a deal. It's not like telling Elma I came from another universe would make anything bad happen. She might think I'm a little crazy, but surely she won't send me off to get vivisected or whatever.

"If you really want to know, I'll tell you," I said. "Just be warned that this gets weird."

"This is starting to sound scary… But sure. I wanna know."

"Really? Okay, well, where do I begin? Do you know about parallel universes and junk?"

“The concepts, sure. Beats me whether they actually exist or not, though.” Elma shrugged, still using my stomach as her pillow.

“Yeah, so, I think I came from one of those. Same with the Krishna. At least, that’s how it seems to me.”

Elma went very still and very quiet.

I hurriedly continued, “Do you remember when we went to the mercenary guild for the first time, and the guy said I had no docking history? It makes sense now, right? Tarmein Prime was the first place I docked after I came to this universe.”

“He did say that, didn’t he? But that’s still just… A parallel universe? Is that even possible?”

“What do you mean? Like in terms of the Krishna’s parts being compatible with things found here?”

“Yeah,” she said. “If you came from another universe, then it’s kinda weird that the Krishna is compatible with equipment made with this universe’s tech. I guess technology could’ve progressed in the same way in both universes, but I’ve never seen any other ships like this here. Plus, based on your skills in battle, you’re a top-notch mercenary, not some random newbie who just showed up here.”

My face flushed at the praise. “I’m tickled to hear you say that.”

Elma barreled on. “This doesn’t explain your complete lack of common sense, though. If your universe has similar battleships and mercenaries, shouldn’t the shared wisdom be similar? It doesn’t add up.”

“Well, yeah, maybe,” I said. “This might confuse you even more, but…I’m not even a mercenary in my universe. I’m just a company employee—a salaryman—with a love for video games.”

“A salaryman? So you just work for some corporation? Did you at least work in their battle department or something?”

“Nope. I’d never even shot a gun before coming here. I was a totally normal person. Not a whiff of violence.”

“Huh?” Elma sat up and cocked her head.

I guess never shooting a gun sounds pretty crazy from her perspective.

"That doesn't make sense," she said. "You said you won that gun in a shooting tournament somewhere, right? That didn't sound like a lie. I've seen you fire a gun too—you don't look like an amateur."

"That's true, but…okay, I'm just gonna say it. Me getting the Krishna, me getting that gun, me having my skills as a merc…all of that happened in a video game. From my perspective, it's like I just dove straight into a video game universe."

"Like a virtual reality video game?"

"Do they have those here?" I asked.

"Yeah," she said, "but not a lot of people play them since you need to have a port installed near your spine. They're more for medical use, anyway." Elma shrugged. "Though there are some people who get *really* into the full-immersion VR stuff. Maybe you're one of those people. Apparently, if you experience battle in virtual reality, it affects your real-life capabilities as well."

"Nah. My universe is way behind this one. The games I played were on a stationary console, if that makes sense. Maybe that's like an antique in this universe? We didn't have interstellar travel either; in fact, we hadn't even colonized other planets yet."

"You hadn't? Jeez, you might as well have been barbarians. Well, it does sound like a crazy adventure. Jumping into a video game world is like something out of a classic novel."

Were transported-into-another-world novels *classics* in this universe? Was I experiencing their equivalent of *Gilgamesh*?

I laughed. "Yeah, sure. It'd almost be more realistic if I *did* lose my memories in an accident and made up the memories I just told you about."

"But all of that was the truth, right?"

"From my perspective, yes. I guess we can't know if it's true without sucking my memories out and taking a look inside."

"Nothing's impossible, but I don't think we have to go that far."

“Nothing’s impossible? That is mildly terrifying. Is it actually worth it to try something like that?”

“If you’re worried, you might be better off doing it. Do you have any big questions or problems right now?” Elma said.

“Not especially.” I mean, sure, I wanted to know what happened and how I’d ended up here, but I wasn’t desperate for the information. It wasn’t like I was champing at the bit to go home.

“Then what’s the problem?” Elma asked. “Let sleeping dogs lie.”

“Maybe you’re right.”

She nodded firmly. “I am.”

“Oh, is that so? You don’t have anything else to say?”

“Not really. No matter what you think of yourself, it doesn’t change how I see you. Well, except for the fact that ‘cringey teenager who kept being cringey into adulthood’ just got added to my mental description of you.”

“Hey, stop that. That’s way too close to the truth.”

Elma giggled. I could feel the little vibrations of her laughter from where she reclined against me.

“Y’know, you’re a good woman,” I said.

“Yeah, duh. Who did you think I was?”

“A sad little space elf.”

“Okay, buddy, you’re on.”

“Whoa, cut it out!”

Elma launched into a tickle attack and we scuffled on my bed, fighting for dominance. *Heh heh heh. Do you think your tiny little arms can beat my trained muscles?*

“Grah?! You know the ude-hishigi-juji-gatame arm lock?!” I blurted.

Elma outmaneuvered me, pinning me down and tickling me until I cried from laughter. *It’d be nice to have some tender, loving affection here. Seriously…*

***

Elma and I spent the rest of the night roughhousing and counterattacking. In the morning, I headed straight for a bath and then hit the training room for a workout. After that, I washed off again. Even when I'd finished all that, Elma was still sleeping peacefully in my bed.

I found Mimi in the cafeteria in workout clothes.

"Good morning, Master Hiro," she said. Her skin was already slick with sweat.

"Morning, Mimi," I said. "Did you just finish working out?"

"Yes. I was just about to take a bath."

"Good timing. I'll go ahead and get breakfast ready while you wash up."

"Sure, thanks! I'll be right back." Mimi grinned and trotted off to her bath. She could have just come in while I was washing, though I suppose our baths would have taken a lot longer that way…

Elma finally poked her sleepy head into the kitchen while I was still preparing breakfast. "Mooorning…"

"Hey, good morning," I said. "What the heck are you wearing?"

"I just wanted to try on one of your shirts." She padded out, dressed in one of my T-shirts. Although it hung large on her, it barely covered her butt.

Definitely distracting.

“Mimi’s in the bath right now,” I told her. “You can go in after.”

“Mm.” Elma wasn’t much of a morning person, especially if it was a rest day. Maybe not the best quality to find in a mercenary, but Elma reliably switched to “go” mode when necessary.

“Elma, good mor—” Mimi started, but stopped short. “Oh, my. You look rather…”

“Mornin’. I’m gonna go take a bath.” Elma yawned and waved at us as she headed off to the bathroom. Mimi remained rooted in place from shock.

“Do you want one of my shirts too?” I asked.

“Can I really have one?!”

“Yeah, I guess.” *Are my shirts worth being that happy about?* I mean, it certainly would make me happy. Even though Mimi was shorter than Elma, my T-shirt would be just as risqué on her, especially around the chest, if you catch my drift. Heh heh. “Anyway, let’s eat. Want the daily special?”

“Sure!” Mimi chirped.

I got the Steel Chef 5 up and running. Mimi took a regular-sized serving while I opted for a large one. It was nice to see her upgrading from small portions. At first, she’d had trouble eating enough, but as she started training aboard the ship, it seemed her body was adapting and needed the extra fuel.

“Did you see how out of it Elma was?” I said. “She’ll be in the bath for a while. Let’s go ahead and eat without her.”

“Yes, I suppose.” Mimi hesitated for a moment but ultimately agreed.

When Elma hit “rest” mode, she hit it hard. She could be in that bath for more than an hour, but hey, whatever it took to recharge her batteries.

“Welp, let’s eat up.” I put my hands together, and Mimi followed suit.

“Yes, let’s.”

Today, the Steel Chef 5 had served up steamed rice, salmon, rolled omelets, and potato salad. I mean, sort of. None of those things were *real*. They were all artificial. But the food cartridges could almost perfectly imitate the real thing using just algae and krill.

But why does it mix potato salad in with Japanese-style rice and rolled omelets? They all taste fantastic, but the Steel Chef makes some strange decisions.

Mimi got porridge, grilled beef, and salad for her meal. Judging by her hums of pleasure, it wasn't half bad either.

"Mimi, can I have some?" I asked. "I'm curious about the taste."

"Oh, absolutely. Go ahead." Mimi scooped up some of the porridge and offered it to me. Not exactly how I planned to eat it, but I swallowed my pride and accepted it.

Hmm… It's a little sweet. Sort of like a mellow soup? I detected a tinge of cheese and honey as well. *Is this a dessert?*

"It's delicious, isn't it?" Mimi said.

"It's not bad," I replied. "Sorry, I've just never tasted something like this, so it's hard for me to judge. If nothing else, it makes me want another spoonful or two. Here, how about you have some of my imitation omelet? Say 'ahh.'"

"Ahh." I scooped up a small bite with my chopsticks and fed it to her. The faux omelet was soft and sweet, so Mimi was sure to love it. When she took a bite, her face lit up. "Mm, that was yummy! Here, your turn. Say 'ahh.'"

"Ahh." Mimi spooned me another scoop of porridge. *Mmm, exquisite.* The tastes of cheese and milk mixed perfectly, granting it a delicate touch of sweetness. What a strange food.

"Seriously, guys?" Elma stood in the doorway with her hands on her hips and rolled her eyes at us.

"Good morning, Elma," Mimi said.

"Morning again, Elma."

She sighed. "Yeah, good morning. If I'm bothering you, I can just go back to my bath."

"Um…?" Mimi raised an eyebrow in confusion.

"What, do you wanna get fed too? Open up, babe." I plucked up another piece of omelet and held it out to her, but she just snatched it with

her fingers, popping it into her mouth. She made a show of licking her fingers clean after, which I was more than happy to watch.

"Look at you being all lovey-dovey in the morning," she said. "Well, whatevs. I guess it's your turn, since I had him all to myself yesterday."

Mimi smiled impishly, her cheeks turning pink. "Hee hee!"

Elma chuckled to herself and went to order breakfast from the Steel Chef.

"Why don't you go out on a date or something?" Elma suggested. "I'll stay here at the ship, so I can let you know if Inagawa Technologies calls us. Oh, and make sure you stop by the mercenary guild. We didn't get to do it yesterday, and it's best if we let them know we're here."

"Okay, sure," I said. "Does that sound good to you, Mimi?"

"Of course!" Mimi wrung her hands together and huffed in excitement. "I already finished my research yesterday!"

"Someone's eager," I said.

"Looks like it," Elma agreed. "Make sure you show her around, okay?"

"I didn't do any research myself, so I doubt I can," I said. "Sorry about that, Mimi. But hey, at least I can protect you while we're out there."

"Good enough." Elma plopped down with her breakfast in the chair next to me.

Elma, you're eating that thick artificial steak and a whole heap of potato salad first thing in the morning? That's quite the appetite you've got there… Not that it was my place to judge.

Chapter 2:
Shopping with Mimi

"THIS PLACE is quite different from Tarmein Prime," Mimi said as we walked the streets of Arein Tertius. It was no longer the city of eternal night; today, everything was illuminated.

"That it is," I said. "It feels a lot livelier here, and the people walking around have a different aura to them."

No two people we passed were alike. People in Tarmein Prime, especially the Third Division, tended to dress similarly. However, here in the Underground Division of Arein Tertius, variety ruled the day. We passed people in suits just as often as folks wearing full-on gothic lolita dresses. Skintight body tights contrasted with bulky robotic attire—though I wondered if they were secretly the robots that Elma had mentioned and not people at all.

It wasn't just the clothes either. Even among the strictly humanoid beings we saw, there were more amphibian, reptilian, and mammalian features than I'd ever thought possible. Animal ears poked out of people's hair. A blue-skinned girl with horns caught my eye as she strutted past. I certainly wanted to get familiar with somebody like that, if you know what I mean.

Then there were the outright monsters: flying jellyfish with lightbulb-tipped appendages, tentacle monsters like something out of a hentai game, and so much more. How should a man even react to that? Could they even understand me if I tried to speak to them?

No. Don't think about it too hard or you've already lost. I shoved the questions aside. Dwelling on it would endanger my sanity.

"I can't believe it's brighter underground," I said to divert my whirling thoughts.

"The aboveground area is called the Surface District," Mimi explained, "and it's always kept as dark as night. Underground districts such as these are where people typically live. The lighting inside changes to mimic morning, midday, evening, and night."

Mimi offered all this without so much as a glance at the aliens striding past us. Was this normal for her?

"That building goes all the way up to the ceiling," she said.

I craned my neck to peer up a high-rise, still trying to clear my mind. *That's huge. How many floors is it?*

"It also works as a pillar to support the overall structure of the colony," Mimi explained. "The lowest floor sticks out into space."

"Oh, yeah. I do remember buildings sticking out of the colony's outer walls." I'd spotted them when we'd first docked. The colony wasn't a flat structure, but rather a multidimensional cuboctahedron with protrusions like this building. "What is that even for?"

"They have a lot of different tenants! Restaurants, shops, clinics, and even company offices and hotels."

"Wow, that's a lot for one building. Could be fun to wander around in there."

"Yeah," Mimi agreed. "We could spend the whole day in there and still not see all of it, I bet."

We continued our amicable chat as we walked through town. Since we'd just eaten breakfast, neither of us was hungry. *What to do, then?*

"Hey, Mimi. Wanna look for some new clothes?" I proposed.

"Hmm. We could, but I think my current clothes should be enough for me."

"C'mon, let's get you something fashionable just for fun," I said. "I'd love to see you in one of those dresses." I gestured toward a girl in one of those gothic lolita dresses, and Mimi instantly went red. "What? Did I say something weird?"

"Oh, no. I just, um, I'm not sure if I could pull it off." Mimi flicked furtive glances between the girl and her own feet, pointedly ignoring me.

"Pssh, no way," I said. "You'll look great. Come on, let's give it a try."

"Umm…"

“You did the research. Do any of the shops in there have stuff like that?”

“Yes, but…”

I grinned. Mimi’s smile turned into a tight wince. *Give it up, Mimi. You’re gonna look great!*

***

“Is this it?” I asked as we stepped into a shop named Atelier Pure.

“Yes,” Mimi said.

The moment we entered the store, I regretted pushing so hard to come here. To be honest, I’d forgotten what lolita fashion retailers tended to be like. It was not exactly my thing, what with all the frills and lace everywhere. I stood out instantly, like soot on a fancy white doily. We beings known as men did not belong in places like this; the anti-male energy here was palpable.

I turned to Mimi. “You can’t go in alone, huh?”

“R-right…”

“Then let’s do this!”

“Y-you don’t have to force yourself.”

I took Mimi’s hand, and we plunged into the forbidden garden. Instantly, all three employees swiveled toward us, their very first customers of the day. They were identically outfitted, and I gulped at their intense, watchful gazes.

“Welcome!”

“Is this your first time here? Thank you for coming to see us.”

“We’re honored that you’ve chosen us. Our staff will do all that we can to drag you into the swamp. We aim for your satisfaction!”

The employees circled around us like sharks going in for the kill.

What was that about a swamp? These people are scary!

“Huh? Uh, th-thanks?” I stammered as Mimi clung to me in terror. *Ooh, there’s that lovely yet evil chest. I, for one, feel better already.* “You know what we’re here for, right?”

“Absolutely!” All three employees replied in unison, flashing customer-service smiles. At least it seemed my aims were aligned with theirs, though maybe for different reasons. *Glad they’re making this easy,* I thought.

“Honestly, I don’t know how much these getups usually cost, but we do have a budget,” I said.

“Mm? How much is it?”

I tried to come up with a number, but even back in Japan, I’d never shopped for this sort of thing. I was totally in the dark.

“How much does the average full outfit cost?” I said.

“Hmm. It depends on the manufacturer, but on average, it costs about 1,000 Ener,” an employee said.

“Okay, then ten… No, 20,000 is our budget,” I said. “Could you find something you think would look good on her?”

I flashed my current funds at the employees via my terminal. They blinked, stiffening up straight before sharing mischievous smiles.

“Might I also show you some things outside of your budget?” one offered.

“Sure,” I said, “as long as you don’t go too overboard. If you only show us the expensive stuff, we’re going somewhere else.”

“You can trust me. Come right this way.”

Two employees had started measuring Mimi, but they stopped when the third bent down to confer quietly with them. Every eye then turned to Mimi.

“Huh? Um, wh-what’s the matter?” Mimi said.

Two of the employees whisked her away while she was still babbling adorably. The last one led me to a waiting room at the back of the store.

“Male customers spoil the ambience,” the employee said, “so we would appreciate your waiting here. I’ll bring you a drink.”

“Thanks.” I definitely didn’t mind stepping back and letting the experts work. A fancy, frilly place like this was a high-difficulty environment for yours truly.

“Just leave her to us,” the employee said. “I swear that we will find her the perfect outfit.”

“I’ll trust you pros.”

The employee grinned before sliding away. *Seriously, what is that walk?* She didn’t step so much as disappear entirely. A moment later, she slid back into view and poured milk and sugar into a coffee cup. *Wait, where did she come from? Is this supernatural stuff? Horror? I’m actually shaking.*

I shuddered but sat there quietly sipping my coffee. Back on Tarmein Prime, we’d gone to a cosplay shop that offered a virtual dressing room app. I fiddled with it here too, to test out Mimi in various outfits.

“Sorry to keep you waiting!” an employee chirped.

“U-umm…” Mimi stammered.

An angel descended before me. Mimi now wore a soft, white dress fringed with light-pink frills. A large ribbon adorned her hair, and white stockings smoothed her legs. Her light-pink shoes matched the faint tinge of her frills.

Mimi fidgeted, her pink cheeks the perfect accessory to her ensemble. I, however, was in heaven. Somehow, Mimi had become even cuter.

“Why, you’re so precious that he’s speechless,” an employee said. “I’m glad to see that he has taste.”

“The theme here is sweet and cute. Wanna buy it?” another employee asked.

I nodded and handed them my terminal.

“Thank you, sir!”

Once we paid, I used the camera to film Mimi at every angle. Later, I could extract individual images from the video file.

“D-don’t record meee,” Mimi protested, bashful.

“I need to preserve the memory of such a lovely angel.”

“Sir, I must ask you to be calm,” an employee warned. “We have more to show you.”

“Okay.” I released Mimi from my full-body video recording. “You’re seriously an angel, though, Mimi.”

“Th-thank you…”

“Hee hee. Shall we prepare the next change of clothes?”

“Come right this way, miss!”

Mimi was yoinked away yet again while I settled back with some tea and cookies. I couldn’t remember anyone bringing the snacks; they’d kind of just appeared. *Creepy.*

It didn’t take as long for Mimi to change this time. She returned shortly in a plain, stately getup that exuded classical, upper-crust beauty.

“Wonderful!” I said. “It almost looks like everyday wear.”

“Doesn’t it?” one employee agreed. “It was made with that in mind. We have a few other pieces like it if you’d care to see those.”

“Yes, please.”

“Thank you, sir.”

“Um, this is too much…” Mimi said.

I shook my head. “I like this stuff, and I don’t compromise on my hobbies.” We were still well within our budget. Besides, this was a small

price to pay for such a wonderful sight.

"Hee hee, what a lovely couple you are. Let's get to the next one, miss."

"O-okay…"

Mimi vanished again.

I wonder what's coming next? I'm just dying from excitement. Oh, I should send that video to Elma.

I opened my texting app and shared the video. Elma's response pinged instantly: *Aww, that's cute! Did you buy it?*

I replied: *Yeah, already bought it. I also bought a few less fancy ones.*

Good. You could buy me some clothes too, y'know.

I figure something more mature would fit you better. But hey, you're right. Wanna come here sometime?

Nah, I'm just kidding. I can't pull off that frilly stuff.

When you put it like that, you just make me want to see it even more.

Yeah, I figured you might say that.

Our chat continued throughout the Mimi Fashion Show. The employees tried out a few more designs, including an anti-laser hyperweave dress, but this last idea was simply too expensive. We left with a simpler hyperweave dress instead.

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After that little diversion, we made directly for the mercenary guild. Mimi had switched to a black lolita dress for the journey, but she clung to my jacket as we walked, bashful in her new getup.

"Mimi, you stand out more when you walk like that," I said. "Just flaunt it. That makes you less visible, if you can believe it."

"Ulp… Yes, sir."

“Also, there’s no reason to be embarrassed. It looks great. I mean it. You’re adorable.”

“Jeez, cut it out!” Mimi only buried her face more forcefully against my jacket. I hadn’t meant to hit her with friendly fire, but I’d already sunk her battleship. *She’s just so adorable when she’s all shy!*

Mimi—who was still blushing furiously—eventually emerged from hiding, and we continued on our way. The mercenary guild occupied an upper floor in another building in the Harbor District, near the ship port. It was a three-tiered building: the first tier was thirty floors, the second was fifty-two, and the highest was three.

Mimi and I chatted on the elevator up to the mercenary guild’s floor, trying to decide where to go for lunch after this. The elevator interrupted us with a ding. When we stepped out, every eye in the room landed on us.

Once again, I was struck by the variety of this colony. Sure, there were a few of the typical tough-guy types, but I also saw a bipedal reptilian, a tan girl in bikini armor, another girl dressed inexplicably like a maid, a red panda in overalls, and a group of six child-sized mercs in matching spacesuits, just to name a few.

“The place is a lot…livelier than Tarmein Prime’s merc guild,” I commented.

“Agreed.”

The mercs sizing me up quickly lost interest, but an awful lot of eyes stayed glued on Mimi. I dragged her with me to the counter; standing there only made her look more out of place. I half-expected some cliché anime stuff. Maybe some guy shouting, *Who do ya think you are, bringin’ a cutie like that in here, newbie?* Fortunately, nothing like that happened and we made our way to the counter unharried. She drew attention because of her cuteness, but they seemed to have realized she was a mercenary.

A young woman greeted us. “Welcome. What brings you here today?” She wore a crisp guild employee uniform and sat up primly to meet us. It seemed being pretty was a hiring requirement around mercenary guilds. I eyed her bust, judging it to be somewhere between Mimi’s and Elma’s in size.

“I’m Captain Hiro, and this is my operator-in-training, Mimi. We came from Tarmein Prime, so we’re here to introduce ourselves. We’re planning to stay and work here for a little while.” I presented my terminal, and the receptionist set it on a reader device. With a ping, a holographic display flickered to life.

“Okay, confirmed,” she said. “Captain Hiro, rank silver, two crew members. Where is your other member, Elma?”

“She’s back at the ship, since we’ve got business with Inagawa Technologies.”

“Inagawa Technologies… I see. I’m not sure if your luck is good or bad to run into them as soon as you arrived in this system.”

“I’d like to say it’s good, since it got us some cash.” I shrugged, prompting a chuckle from the receptionist. *Yeah, I know. I’m the kind of guy to attract trouble everywhere I go. I have to think of it as good luck or I might just go crazy.* “So have they contacted you about us yet?”

“As of this moment, no,” she said. “It’ll probably take them some time to calculate your reward and reach an internal decision. It is a very large firm, after all.”

“Gotcha. If they do say anything, could you contact us at my ship?”

“Of course, sir… Oh?” The receptionist sobered and tapped at her display. “You’re actually right on time. They’ve sent us a message just now.”

“Oh, wow. What’s it say?”

“They have offered 500,000 Ener as a reward.”

“Hmm. I dunno what the right price is. Not that I’m trying to be greedy, as long as it’s not super low. Mind if I talk about it with my crew first?”

“Go right ahead.”

I called Elma, who picked up immediately.

“Heyo, Elma here. What’s the matter? Getting into trouble down there?”

“Nah, we just got to the mercenary guild,” I said. “Inagawa Technologies sent an offer. They said 500,000 Ener. How does that sound to you?”

“Hmm… Well, we didn’t have to tow them, so I’d call that a reasonable price for guarding them until the police arrived. That’s a decent reward for a medium craft.”

“So I should take it?”

“Yeah, I think so. Ask Mimi, just in case.”

“Gotcha. Thank you.”

“No problem. I’m glad you trust me with this stuff. See ya later.” Elma disconnected with a click.

I turned to Mimi. “Elma seems to believe 500,000 Ener is good. Do you have any thoughts?”

“Inagawa Technologies owns general hospitals, I believe,” Mimi said. “Perhaps in addition to the money, you could try to get a recommendation for a medical examination?”

“Wow, really? Good call.” I addressed the receptionist. “Can we set that up?”

“Yes, sir. I’ll be sure to communicate that. I’ll get in contact with you as soon as they reply.”

“Thanks a ton. By the way, I’ve been wondering…”

“Yes? Is there something I can help with?”

“Could you direct me to a restaurant where we can eat some of this colony’s specialties?”

The receptionist hesitated a moment, taken aback by my query. Guess she didn’t really expect a question like that at a mercenary guild.

Is it that weird of a question? Everyone needs to eat, after all!

Chapter 3:
Medical Exams

MY LOVELY DATE with Mimi ended with lunch at the place the guild receptionist had recommended. It was, uh, quite the experience.

What *was* their specialty, you may ask? First, let me say that a lot of people insist you'll never take to another culture's specialties like you do your own, but I don't really buy that crap. After all, how could a *specialty* be bad? It's their specialty!

Or so I thought.

Here, you couldn't really *taste* the contents of a freshly made food cartridge unless you were dining at the place it was made. Frankly, it might not have been the best idea for the establishment to take the ingredients and turn them into a paste for our consumption.

It was filling, yes, and it was savory. Kind of like a big, savory milkshake. Nutritional paste might be the best way to put it. Mimi and I couldn't help but scrunch up our faces like Tibetan foxes when we ate it. I had to wonder if the receptionist lady had it out for us.

In any case, by the time we returned, Inagawa Technologies sent us a message with a referral for their general hospital. We headed there the next day for our checkups.

"What's wrong?" Elma asked. "You don't look too happy."

"Sorry. I just can't stand that stall over there."

As fate would have it, we had to pass that horrible nutritional-paste milkshake place on our way to the hospital. Mimi looked just as nauseated by the proximity as I did. Incidentally, she was wearing a simple athletic outfit with a jacket on top so it would be easy to undress for our medical exams—Elma and I were dressed similarly. Naturally, we all had our laser guns too.

"Was it gross?" Elma asked.

“The lady at the guild recommended it, but yeah, it was awful,” I said.

“It was…a valuable experience,” Mimi commented.

I still couldn’t believe they considered this their “specialty,” though I supposed it was true that I wouldn’t find anything like it anywhere else in the universe. At least it was cheap and filling. I certainly wasn’t looking to be a repeat customer, though.

Mimi and I went on ranting about the horrible milkshakes until we reached a large building with the Inagawa Technologies logo painted on the wall.

“They made it easy to find, huh?” I muttered.

“It was certainly easy to spot from a distance.” Mimi craned her neck to gawk up at the building. Elma, on the other hand, didn’t seem too interested.

“How many floors *is* it?” I murmured on our way inside.

“They’ve gotta have guide robots here,” Elma said.

What the heck is a guide robot? I wondered as I followed after Elma. She pressed her terminal against a console on the wall. It beeped, then an orb the size of a fist rolled out of a hole in the wall.

“Welcome!” the orb said. “I am navigation unit N-34. Elma, I will be your guide to your destination.”

“Whoa, now *that* is high-tech,” I said.

“It’s not really…” Elma said. “But I guess it would be to you, huh?”

“Heh. Yeah, I guess.”

“Is it?” Mimi said.

“It is, trust me,” I assured her.

Mimi cocked her head to one side. Right, I’d never actually told her about my past as I had with Elma. She didn’t seem to suspect anything about me, though, so perhaps I’d see what Elma thought before taking that risk.

The N-34 navigation unit rolled down the hall, leading us toward the elevators.

“Heh heh.” I chuckled. “This thing’s kinda cute.”

“Really? You have interesting taste,” Elma drawled.

“It’s like a cute little animal.”

“I guess I can see that… It’s like it’s doing its best, despite being tiny.”

The navigation unit picked a floor, and the elevator began to rise. I wasn’t sure how it worked, but the elevators in this universe never needed to stop to let people on and off. You just went directly where you needed to go.

The elevator dinged, the doors opened, and the navigation unit rolled on toward our destination. It made a little clicking noise as it went—a clever design element, since it made it so easy to follow.

“Looks like we’re here,” I said. A room opened out before us. Doctors and nurses in white coats bustled past under the bright lights. Everything was blindingly white, clean, and sterile.

The robot rolled right up to someone’s foot. “Hello and welcome,” the person said. “I’ve been waiting for you.”

She stood about as tall as me, dark hair braided all the way down to her hips. Her sleepy eyes appraised us from behind thick glasses as she watched us with her hands in the pockets of her long white coat. Even with that heavy lab coat on, her chest looked like it could rival even Mimi’s. *How excellent.*

“The name’s Shouko,” she said. “I’m the one in charge of your medical exam. A doctor, y’know. Nice to meet you.” Her smile proved surprisingly sweet.

“I’m Captain Hiro, and these are my crew members, Elma and Mimi. We’re in your hands, Dr. Shouko.”

“Aww, c’mon,” she said. “You don’t have to be so stiff. Let’s all be friends, okay?”

“Oh, really? Works for me.”

I'm sure a lot of people tense up when they see a doctor who looks like that.

"So you're here for a full medical exam, right?" Dr. Shouko asked, pulling out a tablet. *Where'd she get that from? Weren't her hands in her pockets before?*

"Yes, ma'am," I said. "I'm especially interested in which vaccinations I have and don't have yet. Mimi here should only have the most common ones from Tarmein Prime too. We'll be going all over the place as mercenaries, so we want to be safe. Elma, how about you?"

"Like I said, I've got them all," Elma said. "Besides, we elves have better immune systems than humans, so it's not super necessary. But I guess I might need updates on some of my shots, so it's probably best that I get examined too."

"Mhm, mhm." Dr. Shouko took some notes. "Anything else?"

"Um, Master Hiro lost his memories—" Mimi started, but I interrupted her.

"Sorry, Mimi. I lied."

"Huh?! Do you mean that?!" Her earnest shock stung. *Dammit, Mimi, don't look at me like that.*

"It's a bit more complex than memory loss. To put it simply, my memories aren't totally clear. Some sort of hyperdrive accident or something brought me and my ship to the Tarmein System. I'm not sure why yet, though. My ship doesn't have any docking records from before that system, either. It's as if I just suddenly appeared in this universe out of nowhere."

"Huh…" Dr. Shouko said. "That's pretty weird, isn't it?"

"It is definitely weird. Not only are my memories from before the accident weird, but things just don't seem to match up in general. I was wondering if you could check if any of that has been affecting my body."

"Mhm. So it's possible that this hyperdrive stuff is putting a burden on your body or mind," Dr. Shouko said. "I'd agree that you could use a thorough checkup." Dr. Shouko hummed to herself as she tapped her tablet.

Is she making a medical record or something? "No special medical history? No chronic conditions?"

I shook my head. "Not as far as I know." I didn't even have any allergies.

"Same," Mimi said.

"Me neither," Elma added.

"Let's get right to it, then. First, we'll do a full scan in our medical pods. The ones here are our newest model."

"Inagawa Tech's, right?"

"Yep! We aren't much bigger than any other company in size or scope, but our technology is still the best. The only flaws are the pod's size and cost, really. We like to shoot for the stars, y'know?"

Dr. Shouko went on extolling the virtues of the medical pods while leading us through the facility. It was all just garbled jargon to me.

"So that about explains it," she said.

"I didn't even understand a fifth of that," I said flatly.

"I at least know it's incredible!" Mimi said, ever the optimist.

"It seems functional, at least," Elma said.

"Yep, 'incredible' sums it up pretty well." Dr. Shouko shrugged off my dour review. She probably got more than her fair share of glazed eyes and blank, uncomprehending expressions when she explained things. *I bet she enjoys lab work more than the human interaction aspects of medicine.*

"You know, I owe you all my life for that rescue a few days back," Dr. Shouko said. "I'm gonna give you the best treatment I can, so don't worry."

"Wait, what? You were on that ship we saved?" I said.

She gave me a hearty nod. "Yep! I thought we were goners for sure. I'm a pretty plain woman, so if pirates boarded our ship instead of shooting us down, they'd probably just *dispose* of me, if ya catch my drift." She shrugged.

Dr. Shouko was selling herself short if she thought anyone would consider her plain, especially with a chest like that. Though, when it came to space pirates, being *disposed* of might be preferable.

"Anyway," she continued, "I was really insistent that I take care of your medical exams. I'm more of an R&D gal, but meh, don't worry about it. I've got a license, and I betcha I'm a lot better than some of those so-called 'doctors' out there."

"Uh-huh." *Would it be rude to ask for a new doctor?* I glanced at Mimi and Elma, who both shuffled their feet and shrugged. *Guess we're stuck with her.*

Whatever. She said it was fine, so we just had to trust her. If it didn't work out, maybe we could try a different hospital instead. It was just a routine checkup, after all.

"Here we are!" Dr. Shouko announced. "Come right in."

"All right… Whoa," I said.

"Wooow…" Mimi breathed.

"Neat," Elma said.

Dr. Shouko had guided us into a room containing several medical pods, each much larger than the Krishna's. The ship's pod was about the size of a small bed, while each of these were as large as the Krishna's entire med bay, at over six feet tall, ten feet long, and six feet deep.

"They're pretty big," I commented. Understatement of the century right there.

"Riiight?" Dr. Shouko said. "On top of that, these babies all have computers installed in them for positron emission tomography. Their functionality is guaranteed. Now get to stripping and pick your pods." She handed us each medicine to take as we undressed.

"Stripping? Uh, how much?" I said.

"All of it," she said.

"All of it?!"

"*All* of it. I'm used to naked specimens, so don't worry about me."

“Oh, okay…” I was more worried about myself than Dr. Shouko, in truth. Nevertheless, I peeled off my jacket and gym wear, sneaking a look over at Mimi and Elma. “Oof!” Elma threw her jacket right into my face to obstruct my view.

“Mimi, hurry up and get undressed so you can get in your pod,” Elma ordered. “*You* stay like that until we’re done, capisce?”

“Yes, ma’am.” I struck a quick salute and obeyed, but I was completely naked by now. *Don’t I look like a perv with a woman’s jacket on my head? Doesn’t this seem weird to anyone? Just me, I guess.*

“They’re in their pods now,” Dr. Shouko informed me. I pulled the jacket off of my head and threw my clothes into a basket.

“Thanks. Sorry you had to see that,” I said.

“Oh, no. You did just fine,” Dr. Shouko said.

With a quick nod of agreement, I opened a medical pod and climbed inside, lying on my back. *It’s kinda cramped. It reminds me of the time I got that MRI scan done.* The medicine Dr. Shouko had given us while we undressed spread a strange warmth through my whole body. I thought only women in adult films could radiate such heat.

“Can you hear me?” Dr. Shouko said. “I’m about to start the scan, so relax and try not to move.”

“Gotcha.” Pale green light scanned up and down my body a few times. I really hoped there wasn’t going to be some crazy side effect thanks to me coming from a different universe.

“And we’re done! I’m about to open the pod. Come on out and put some clothes on.”

Psheeew. The pod opened with a hiss of air. The scan had taken no time at all—not that I was complaining. *Good ol’ sci-fi universes.* I hastily put my clothes back on and returned Elma’s jacket to her.

“Mimi and I are fine, but I’m kinda scared about your results, Hiro,” Elma said.

“Let’s hope that you’re okay,” Mimi said.

“Hey, don’t say that. I’m getting all worried,” I said.

“Ah ha ha! I don’t think you have to… Hmm?” Dr. Shouko squinted at her tablet. *Doc, I don’t like how furrowed your brow is!* “Wait. Hmm… Huh?”

“I’m getting really worried now,” I said. “Mind telling me what the heck is going on?”

“No, no, wait. Hmm… Hiro, can I ask you something?”

“Shoot.”

“I just have a few questions based on this,” Dr. Shouko said. “First off…it looks like you don’t have a translator implant in you.”

“Is that so?” I certainly didn’t remember getting any implant like that. Mimi and Elma raised their eyebrows at me.

“That’s unusual, if it’s true.”

“Very unusual,” Mimi agreed.

“Unusual for sure,” Elma said.

“Yes, quite,” Dr. Shouko added.

Apparently, the moment you had a birth certificate in this universe, you got your translator implant for free. Lacking one as an adult was basically unheard of.

“But you haven’t had any issues communicating yet, have you?” Mimi asked.

“Not as far as I’ve seen,” Elma answered for me. “Even if he’s got issues with common sense.”

“Huh, is that true? How about we run some tests?” Dr. Shouko said.

“Sure,” I said.

Dr. Shouko continued as she tapped at her tablet: “I will play several extraterrestrial languages through my speakers. Try repeating what they say. This is an implant test program.”

“Sounds good to me.”

“Okay. Here’s the first one.”

Daily conversation played from Dr. Shouko's tablet speakers, and I repeated what I heard. It all sounded like normal Japanese to me. We finished the test program with no particular issues.

"No problems here." Dr. Shouko scratched her head. "What the heck is going on?"

"I don't have the slightest idea."

Maybe I'm getting that warped-to-another-world language bonus or something? If this is sci-fi, I wish they would've just given me the implant instead. I didn't know what was going on, let alone how to take it.

"Uhh… How about we ignore the implant thing?" I suggested. "I seem to be getting on just fine without it."

"Aww, but I was really interested!" Dr. Shouko whined.

"No, thanks. I'm not here to be your guinea pig, Doctor. Let's get to the next subject."

"Fiiine. My next question is…where are you from?"

"As far as I know, I'm from the third planet in the Solar System, Earth. Like…the one that the sun is in."

The third planet in the Solar System was a weird thing to say; it was the kind of phrase I'd picked up from playing video games too much.

"The sun? I've never heard of that." Dr. Shouko looked to Mimi and Elma for help, but they shook their heads.

"Leaving that aside, what's so important about where I'm from?" I asked.

"Well, your genetic data has a lot of stuff that we've never observed before."

"Like?"

"I looked into it, and your bodily functions aren't different from any other humanoid, so you should be fine there. It's really interesting, though. Having unusual genetic data means that you might have some special genes that we don't possess."

"Could you dumb that down for me?"

“Your genetic data is overflowing with unseen frontiers! Wanna give me some?”

“Uhh…” It was my turn to look to Mimi and Elma for help, but again they just shook their heads, apparently just as confused as me. “What’s in it for me if I help you?”

“It’s valuable data. Like, super valuable. Unknown genetic data is like vast, unexplored space!” Dr. Shouko stepped close, her excitement palpable. *Hey, back off a little. It feels like your eyes are gonna pop out from behind those glasses.* I set my hands on her shoulders to create a little breathing room between us.

“And what would this cost me?” I said.

“Almost nothing!” Dr. Shouko said. “We’ve got tight security, so your data will be safe. I don’t recommend getting examined like this anywhere else, though. If you’re not careful, you could run into someone eager to cut you up and take a look under the hood. We’re a lot better about that. If you give us your genetic data, I can promise that we won’t follow you around or kidnap you.”

“Hmm.” This was not what I was expecting. Sure, I figured it could be a big deal, what with me being from a different universe and all, but I’d never anticipated something like this. What to do? The safest course might be to accept her offer. “Okay, sure. I’ll offer you my genetic data, with one condition. In return, I’d like to entrust Inagawa Technologies with all of my health care.”

“No problem there!” Dr. Shouko replied. “Actually, that’s just what we’d want. It works to our advantage if other companies aren’t getting their hands on your data as well.”

“Sounds like everyone wins. Can you make me an offer right now?”

“Sadly, I don’t have that kind of authority.”

“Let’s hold off on making a final decision, then. For now, let’s just do the medical check and vaccines.”

“*After* I harvest your data. Those checks and vaccines could taint it. I want it as natural as I can get it.” Dr. Shouko offered me an eerie smile.

I shivered. *What kind of vaccine changes your genetic information?*

“So I have to come back?” I said.

“Oh, no, no. I put your data scan at the tippity-top of our priority list. The offer ought to come before long.”

“I see.”

“If you’re willing to wait a little while, I can go ahead with Mimi’s and Elma’s examinations first. They’ll go to a different room for that. Just follow the navigation bot, ladies.” Another of those little guide bots rolled into the room right on cue.

“Sure,” I said. “Let’s just get it over with.”

“Master Hiro…” Mimi squirmed, but Elma chuckled and dragged her away.

“Don’t worry,” Elma said. “The doctors won’t bite. He’s a big boy; he can take care of himself.”

“Let’s go back to the lobby,” Dr. Shouko told me. “That’s a better place to talk.”

“Sure.”

I waved to Mimi and Elma and followed Dr. Shouko back toward the lobby. Even as she walked, the doctor kept tapping away on her tablet.

“The staff will take good care of them, so don’t worry,” Dr. Shouko said, her eyes still glued to her screen. “They’re not researchers like me. They’re normal doctors.”

“That so? By the way, I was wondering: is it that easy to get an offer from you guys?”

“The reward for unknown genetic data depends on its value and potential for practical application. How much of it is unknown also contributes a little bit. Now that I’ve sent the data, it shouldn’t take long for… Oh! Speak of the devil, there it is!”

“That was fast.”

Ridiculously fast, actually. How much sway did Dr. Shouko hold with Inagawa Technologies?

“So let’s talk money,” Dr. Shouko said.

“How forward of you.”

“Money’s a convenient tool in that you can build trust in seconds instead of building it over the course of years. You’ve just gotta have the right price.”

“True,” I agreed. “And what is our price?”

“Three million Ener is our offer.”

“That’s a ton of money. Is my genetic data that valuable?” That was equivalent to 300,000,000 yen. It was like I was from some special, ancient bloodline or something.

“I said this before, but undiscovered humanoid genes are a promising frontier,” Dr. Shouko said. “We could explore whole new realms of understanding and technology with this.”

“A new level…” I muttered.

How the hell is she gonna use it? Well, I guess I don’t know the bioethics of this universe yet, so there’s no point in stressing about it.

“Protect my personal data for me, okay?” I said.

“Absolutely. Here’s the contract, by the way.”

Dr. Shouko presented her tablet and I skimmed the document on the screen. Pretty normal boilerplate stuff: they’d protect my info, no cloning without permission, I was owed 30,000,000 Ener if Inagawa Tech breached the contract, et cetera. They’d even thrown in the bit about all my future health care needs going through them. Hard as I looked, I couldn’t find any loopholes or pitfalls.

“You’re a cautious one,” the doctor mused.

“It’s just scary to give away my genetic data,” I said. “I’m also weirded out by how well you’re compensating me for this.”

“Is it that much? Keep in mind that no matter how much money we make from your data, you won’t see one Ener of it.”

“Well, nothing good can come from being too greedy,” I said. “I’m planning to make money my own way, so that doesn’t concern me.”

“Ooh. How very mercenary of you.” Dr. Shouko grinned to herself.

Despite the easy payday, I had to wonder if this was really for the best. Selling my genetic data creeped me out, but at the same time, Inagawa Tech would probably just keep hounding me if I refused. As long as my crew and I were safe, that was all that mattered.

"All set, then?" Dr. Shouko asked.

"Yeah." I used my finger to sign the contract and seal the deal.

"Woo, I'm glad we got that contract over with! Now, let's get some blood and semen samples."

"Okay, I get the blood. But how do we get the semen?"

"Hee hee. Why don't you wait and see?" Dr. Shouko shot me a funny look and licked her lips.

“Hold up, hold up! This wasn’t in the contract! No, stop, pleeease!”

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“Urk… My purity…” I lamented in Inagawa Tech’s medical pod.

Dr. Shouko’s delighted voice sliced through my self-pity. “A job well done!”

How did they get my semen, you ask? I don’t think I’m ready to talk about that. Instead, I’ll just leave it to your imagination. *I think I’m too traumatized to enter a pod ever again.*

“Some people get really addicted to that, y’know,” Dr. Shouko claimed.

“Never again, I beg of you.” I crawled out of the pod and put my clothes on. *Ugh, my asshole feels so wrong now.* When I pictured giving up my genetic data, I imagined some raunchy fun with Dr. Shouko. Boy, was I ever wrong.

“That takes care of data extraction,” Dr. Shouko said. “Ooh, I’m so excited! Hee hee!”

While I still trembled from that harrowing experience, Dr. Shouko bounced with delight. She beamed at me, her cheeks flushed pink. It was hard to stay mad at her, even as strange as my body felt in that moment.

“Hey, there you are,” Elma said. “Whoa, why are your eyes so red?”

“You all right, Master Hiro?” Mimi asked, concerned.

“Comfort me.” I went in for a hug, but Elma pushed me away. Instead, I dropped to my knees, burying my face in Mimi’s chest. *Ahh, so soft… Oh! She’s stroking my hair! I love her.*

“Hey, what the heck’s going on?” Elma demanded.

Dr. Shouko answered immediately. “He agreed to give us his genetic data, so I extracted it from him. I guess he didn’t enjoy our methods.”

“What methods?”

“We gave him a little poke in the butt, see, to extract his semen.”

“Argh!” The calamity that had befallen me was being revealed to all the world. *Please, don’t rub salt in my wounds, you witch! Now I’m gonna have to get Mimi to comfort me… Heh heh.*

“Poor Master Hiro. You really suffered,” Mimi said.

Meanwhile, Elma rolled her eyes. “You can’t seriously be that much of a baby. You’re just using it as an excuse to get attention.”

“Elma, don’t be mean,” Mimi chided her. “His eyes are so red that I think he really was crying.” Mimi squeezed my head tight. *Aah, pure bliss.*

Dumb, cruel Elma had to go and ruin it, though. “That’s pretty pathetic.”

“Yeah, sorry about that,” the doctor said. “I didn’t think you’d hate it that much, and I was so excited that I didn’t give you the full explanation of what was about to happen. I should’ve explained it better and either let you do it in another room or help you directly myself.”

Was getting her to help an option? Really? Why couldn’t that have been my fate instead?

“If you’re gonna do it yourself, you might as well get our help,” Elma said. “Doctor, you don’t have to go that far for him.”

“Oh? I think I should,” Dr. Shouko said. “If Hiro here hadn’t saved me, I’d be lost in the dead of space right now. A little help is nothing compared to that.” Dr. Shouko giggled to herself and Elma let out a groan of dismay.

Is it just me or are things getting a little awkward? Mimi kept on hugging my head, petting my hair in soothing strokes. I could have absolutely melted there in her arms.

“Okay, I’ve recovered,” I said.

“Master Hiro, are you sure?”

“Like the phoenix, I rise again.” Despite the temptation to stay nuzzled against Mimi’s ample cleavage, I forced myself to my feet.

Elma huffed. “A big man shouldn’t cry from a little bit of poking.”

“It wasn’t a little,” I said. “She shoved it right in. Hey, if you wanna be like that, how about I show you what it was like? You can blame yourself for what’s going to happen tonight.”

“Huh?! H-hey, hold on…” Elma went pale at the prospect.

“So the vaccines are next?” I said, changing the subject.

“Yep!” Dr. Shouko said. “It looks like your basic biological functions are the same as normal humans, so the vaccines should work fine on you. You shouldn’t have any negative side effects, but try to rest for at least three days afterward.”

“Okay, gotcha. Lead the way, Doc.”

“Good. Can you two wait in the lobby for me?” she asked Elma and Mimi.

“’Kay,” Elma said.

“Yes, ma’am,” Mimi said.

The vaccines, thankfully, proved far simpler than the genetic data extraction. Dr. Shouko used a gun-style syringe to inject my arm, neck, and chest, and that was that.

“That was easy. It didn’t even hurt,” I said.

“Hurt? Do vaccines hurt where you’re from?” Dr. Shouko said.

“Oh, uh… In my experience, they can.”

“You said you came from the third planet in the Solar System? So back at home, stuff like this hurts, huh?”

“Just forget it, please,” I said. I suddenly felt weirdly protective of us Earthlings.

“If these procedures cause pain…hmm, then your medical facilities must really be lagging behind.”

“Dr. Shouko, has anyone ever told you not to pry?”

“Ha ha ha! All the time.” Dr. Shouko laughed, shrugging off my attempt at criticism. It was hard to stay upset with her.

“Anyway, can you stop trying to pry information out of me? It’s sensitive stuff.” I said.

“Fiiine. You planet-dwellers are all like that. So private.”

I found it hard to believe I was actually all that similar to “planet-dwellers.” In this universe, living on an actual planet was a rare—and expensive—privilege that very few got to enjoy. Still, better to have Dr. Shouko see me as some rich guy with a bad memory rather than a traveler from a different universe. Who knew what kind of lab rat she and Inagawa Technologies would turn me into then?

“So am I free to go?” I said.

“Sure. I do have a lot more I want to know about you, y’know.”

“Maybe leave it until after you’ve finished looking into my genetics.”

Dr. Shouko tried her best puppy-dog eyes, but I shrugged it off. It would take more than cuteness to bring down the great Captain Hiro.

“Ah ha ha! I’m not good enough for you, huh? Elma and Mimi are cute too, I know.”

“Yep. They are *too*,” I said.

“That’s…what I said,” she replied, looking a little confused.

“Are we done here, then?”

“Oh, yes! I’ll tell you the results of your medical exam. Why don’t we get the girls first?”

We found Elma and Mimi chatting in the lobby. Elma looked up the moment we entered the room.

“I’m surprised you noticed us,” I said.

“I can hear your footsteps from a mile away, buddy.”

“Elves have good hearing, y’know,” Dr. Shouko cut in. “People like them live traditional lives in the forest. They can pick out a wild animal’s footsteps from more than a mile away.”

“Is that true?” I asked Elma. Maybe those long ears weren’t just for show.

“I’m not *that* good.” She shrugged. “These ears aren’t always a positive thing, though. I hear a lot of stuff I don’t wanna hear, and I can’t wear helmets or headgear made for humans.”

“Stuff you don’t wanna hear?” I said.

“Yeah. For example, your stomach’s growling.”

“Jeez, really?” I covered my belly, but I couldn’t feel it, let alone hear it. I was getting pretty hungry, though.

“Ooh, it is about that time. Do you wanna eat next?” Dr. Shouko said.

“We could, but what would we even have?” I asked her.

“If you want a recommendation, you could eat the contents of a freshly made food cartridge—”

“We’ll pass,” Mimi and I interjected, our eyes vacant. Elma chuckled, and Dr. Shouko cocked her head in confusion. Did she not have taste buds? Or had they atrophied due to her disgusting diet? Either way, I pitied her for having to choke down those horrible milkshakes on this colony.

“Really?” Dr. Shouko said. “Well, I’ve got the results of your medical exams. Let’s go talk in private.”

I can only hope there’s nothing wrong with me.

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“Let’s lead with the bottom line here: all three of you are the very picture of health. You have no underlying diseases, and your bodily functions are working just fine,” Dr. Shouko began.

“That’s great!” I said, although I was never really worried about myself to begin with. Elma seemed hardy enough, but Mimi had endured some rough living.

“All of your vaccinations are up to date too,” Dr. Shouko continued. “Elma didn’t need any updates, but we went ahead and updated Mimi and Hiro. But, Hiro, isn’t it just *weird* how you don’t have any traces of previous vaccinations?”

I just shrugged. “I skipped my vaccinations before now due to religious reasons.”

“Fair enough. Anyway, like I said before, you’ll want to take it easy for three days just in case of side effects. The chance is less than a tenth of a percent, but it isn’t zero.”

“Gotcha. Anything else we should watch out for?” I said.

“Hmm…” Dr. Shouko mulled it over. “Mimi and Elma, could I talk to you for a sec?”

“Yes, ma’am?” Mimi said.

“What’s up?” Elma asked.

“Come over here for a moment. Hiro, make some space,” Dr. Shouko said.

“Er, okay?” I was totally lost.

I turned away to give them a little privacy while Dr. Shouko read something off her tablet to the girls. Mimi nodded gravely, while Elma alternated between going pale and blushing furiously.

“Now I’m *really* curious…” I muttered.

“Sorry! Just wait over there.” Dr. Shouko shooed me away.

I caught Elma’s eye for a moment, searching for a clue.

“Ulp!” She went red as a beet. *What’s the deal? I’m dying to know.* Elma was getting redder by the minute; Mimi just sat there composed as could be. What was going on here?

“And that’s that,” Dr. Shouko concluded. “Pay attention to that, okay?”

“O-o-okay, got it,” Elma stuttered.

“Yes, ma’am,” Mimi said.

“So, er… Is there anything else we should talk about?” I asked.

“If you don’t have any questions, then not really,” Dr. Shouko said. “I’ll send all the data to your ship later on.”

Oh, you mean those numbers I never understand. I didn’t know if it was the same in this universe, but back at home, when a doctor sent me those kinds of numbers, they just looked like gibberish to me.

“So are we good to go?” I said.

“Yep! Feel free to get on outta here,” Dr. Shouko replied.

“Can you take the fee out of the pay for my genetic data? If not, I can still pay now.”

“You should probably ask the people in the lobby. I’m just a researcher-slash-doctor, you see.”

“Fair. Well, thanks for everything,” I said.

“Thank you, Doctor,” Mimi said.

“Th-thanks,” Elma managed to say.

With the girls in tow—Mimi perfectly calm and Elma still shaken for some reason—we returned downstairs to the lobby. The sum for all of us was only 90,000 Ener, which was far less than I’d been prepared to pay. Still, that translated to 9,000,000 yen. Yikes.

I guess I should be happy that we’ve bought good health? Nah, that’s still too much. Health care is too expensive in this universe; duly noted.

***

Instead of going out to eat afterward, we headed right back to the ship. The Steel Chef would likely cook us up something better than whatever adventurous new food we might discover in the colony.

“So what did you girls talk about with the doctor toward the end?” I said. My curiosity had never really abated since that whole incident. “Elma’s reaction was so funny that it got me wondering.”

“N-nothing!” Elma yelped, keeping her eyes fixed on her food.

Is this how it feels to be shut down? I turned toward Mimi instead.

“She just told me that she had better medicine for me than the one I’m currently taking,” Mimi said.

“Is that it? Well, how about we switch to it? I’ll gladly pay for it,” I said.

“Yes, sir. Thank you, Master Hiro.” Mimi smiled sweetly. *As it should be; it’s the captain’s job to protect his crew, after all.*

“And you, Elma?” I said.

“A-again, nothing. It was pretty much the same as what she said to Mimi.”

“Hmm…” That didn’t really explain all that blushing, but she’d get angry if I pried. “So we gotta take it easy for three days. What should we do? Do we have to just stay in here the whole time?”

“Actually, no,” Mimi said. “I asked her about it when she vaccinated me, and it seems we don’t have to be that extreme. Taking walks should be no issue, according to her. Also, the side effects are apparently pretty rare.”

“That so? Well, should we go see the sights together?” I said.

“That sounds nice,” Mimi replied. “My research tells me that shopping is the main draw of this colony. They have a lot of different shops.”

“Yeah, for real,” I agreed. “We killed a lot of time that way before. It was fun. They must have something other than shopping, though, right?”

“You can tour the factories—the food cartridge and artificial meat manufacturing, aquaculture farms, assembly plants, shipbuilding factories, and more. They’re quite popular,” Mimi told me.

“Wow, factory tours. Could be fun.” I definitely had to wonder how all this artificial food I’d been shoving down my gullet was made.

“They also have tours of places where modified crops are made into alcohol,” Mimi added.

A certain elf’s ears perked up. *She’s too easy.*

“Are the tours by reservation only?” I asked.

“I believe so. Shall I plan a few?” Mimi said.

“Sure. Can you make a pretty lenient schedule for us? I’ll let you decide where we go. Oh, but make sure you put the alcohol place last, please.” That got Elma’s ears twitching.

“Okay. I’ll find the best-reviewed places. I think some of them offer samples too!” Mimi said.

I snuck a look at Elma, but the moment our eyes met, she shot her gaze back down at the table. *Elma, you already cleaned your plate. There's nothing to look at.*

"Well, how about we make tomorrow a factory tour date?" I said.

"That sounds lovely!" Mimi chirped.

"Y-yeah, lovely," Elma said. "Um, I'm gonna go shopping."

"Hm? What are you going out for? Do you want me to come with you, or are you fine alone?" I said.

"I-I'm fine, I mean it! I'm going fully equipped, okay? Alone!"

Elma jerked to her feet, rushing to put her plate in the dishwasher before I could press the matter.

"Mimi?" I was desperate for a little insight at this point.

"I shouldn't be the one to say it," Mimi said. "It's nothing bad, I think. Once she makes up her mind, she should bring it up herself."

"I still don't get it, but tell Elma not to worry too much, okay?" I said.

"Yes, sir."

We heard a door clang as Elma rushed right out of the ship.

Is she gonna be okay? I'm kinda worried…

***

We didn't see Elma again until nighttime. Even when she returned to the ship, she took pains to avoid me, even having Mimi deliver her dinner and texting us when she wanted her bath. By the time she appeared in my bedroom, her face was red as a tomato. *What's this? I didn't order steamed elf.*

Whatever she was here for, she'd dressed up for the occasion with a neat white negligee. Usually, she'd be a bit more casual about things, but I had to admit I loved seeing her in that cute nightie. Her milky white skin

flushing pink was absolutely titillating. She looked like a whole different person.

"You've been acting weird since lunch," I said. "What's wrong?"

"I-I-I'm fine. I mean it…" Elma did her best to face me, but all that blushing undercut her denial.

"Well, uh… This is awkward. How about you come over and sit down instead of just standing there?"

"Ah… Bleh, fine." She scurried over and hesitated in front of the bed for a moment before finally settling down—out of arm's reach.

"Today sure was tiring, huh?" I said.

"Y-yeah. It was."

"Especially since you're being so weird."

"Am not…" Elma's evasions sounded weaker and weaker.

"Doesn't that hurt?"

"Urgh…" Elma groaned and covered her long, bright-red ears. *So elves hide their ears instead of their faces, huh? That's a funny cultural difference.*

"So what's the deal? Things just seem awkward today." I wrapped an arm around Elma's hips. She twitched, as if I startled her. *Um, what?*

"S-so, um…" she began.

"Yeah?"

"I-I-I, um, see, y-you…"

"You?" I urged her on.

"W-w-w-wee…woooo!"

"Why are you a fire engine now?! Also, why are you stripping—holy *crap*, your breath stinks of alcohol!"

Her stammering stopped, and a naked Elma collapsed right into my arms. She reeked of booze, clearly way too drunk. I set her in the bed and just watched her until she dozed off before sliding under the sheets beside her.

“Mnh… Hirooo…” Elma clung to my arm, a goofy smile plastered on her face. “Let’s make babies… Zzz.”

“What the heck is she dreaming about?”

I shook my head, laughing at Elma’s strange muttering, and relaxed with her warmth against me. That whole medical exam had been mentally exhausting, and I dozed off quickly.

***

“Aaaargh!” Elma woke with a jerk and slapped her hands over her bright-red ears. “I drank to build up my courage, but then I just fell asleep.”

“Courage? Uh, how much did you drink?” I asked her.

“A whole bottle of whiskey.”

“Sad, but not unexpected.” Well, a whole bottle of whiskey would explain why the little space elf had passed out like that. At least she hadn’t vomited. “So? What was wrong? Why did you need that much liquid courage?”

“I mean, I was just in shock,” Elma said. “The doctor told me that you are a compatible mate for me. As in, like, for children. Elves can’t have children with someone unless they’ve subconsciously acknowledged them as their soulmate, so…” Elma turned to face me with jagged motions, like a broken toy.

“Morning,” I murmured, greeting the blushing elf anew. *A greeting is an inviolably sacred act. It is thus written in the Record of Ancient Matters.* Maybe that would help set aside this awkwardness once and for all.

“M-mor—?!” she sputtered, then scooped up a pillow, switching from embarrassed to mad.

“Mgah?!” I screamed. She had smashed a pillow into my face. *Hey, stop smothering me! My nose hurts! Agh, I can’t breathe!*

I wasted a lot of energy on an early morning brawl with a certain deranged elf. *C’mon, girl. You won’t get much attention if you’re this violent in the morning. That’s why you’re a sad little space elf.*

Chapter 4:
Factory Tours

"SO BASICALLY, you act like you hate me, but you're actually head over heels in love with me?!"

"N-no, that's not it! I-I swear!" Elma insisted.

"Elma, please," Mimi said. "It's not nice to cover up your embarrassment with violence." She stuck her tongue out, mocking Elma.

"Mimi gets it," I said.

"Uuuurgh!" Elma hastily covered her red ears again.

"Really, though. How does that work?" I asked. "I'm amazed that humans and elves can breed to begin with. How do the chromosomes and genes work?" Despite having similar bodies, elves and humans had evolved on completely different planets.

"Elves can, um…m-m-make babies with someone they accept as a… Uuurgh!" Elma put her head down on the table to hide her face.

Okay, I guess I get it. Space elves instinctively change to be able to breed with other species, basically. That sounds like it came right out of a porno.

As soon as that thought struck me, my mind went crazy over the possibilities. What if elves could breed with other races as a survival tactic? Maybe they lived on planets overrun with orcs, goblins, and tentacle monsters and the only way to survive was to mate with them. Would later generations retain their elf traits? It sounded insane.

"Well, I think I get the gist of it," I said. "Space elves are awesome, huh?"

Elma frowned. "I-I'm seriously worried about what's going on in your head right now."

"For now, let's just say, 'Aww, Elma wuvs me,'"

"Gah!" Elma groaned, her hands trembling. "Oooough!"

Now she sounds like a siren.

"Master Hiro, it's not nice to tease her," Mimi said.

"Yeah, you're right. Sorry, Elma." Mimi might have been the youngest, but she made a good point.

"I-It's fine. I went a little too crazy anyway," Elma said.

"I appreciate it, though. It's great that you feel that way about me. I love you too. You're reliable, you've got an adorable personality, and most of all, I can relax around you. I feel more comfortable near you than when we're apart, honestly."

"R-r-really?"

"Yeah, for sure. I mean it."

"Huh. W-well, I guess I might feel the same way?" Elma uncovered her ears, staring at her fiddling fingers. *Absolutely adorable.*

"Good!" Mimi declared. "Have we kissed and made up now?"

"Yeah, we've made up," I said.

"S-sure… Yeah," Elma said.

Mimi beamed. "Great! Then I made an itinerary for us today. First, we will visit the Cierra Corporation's artificial meat plant."

"Ooh, artificial meat," I said. "I'm definitely interested in how they make that stuff."

While the artificial meat felt real enough, it was actually a mystery product composed of white meat instead of red. No matter how you cooked it. or how much it might taste and feel like beef or pork, cutting into it always revealed white meat inside.

It was definitely strange, but it tasted amazing and oozed with grease and fat. I couldn't wait to see what kind of crazy process produced it.

"I've never seen an artificial meat plant," Elma said.

"Exciting, isn't it?!" Mimi said. "After that, the plan is to go to an aquaculture farm and the attached food processing plant."

"An aquaculture farm, huh?" I said. "What do they actually farm in a place like that?"

“Isn’t it just the algae they use for food cartridges?” Elma said.

“If that’s all, it doesn’t sound like much fun…” I muttered. “But hey, if they offer tours, then it can’t be that boring. Right?”

“Hmm. I suppose you’re right,” Elma said.

“We’ll eat lunch at the food processing plant,” Mimi continued. “They say that you can eat just-processed foods there.”

“That is kind of horrifying.” I shuddered at the thought.

“It’s okay; it’s not what you think. I already researched it,” Mimi said, her eyes momentarily glazing over.

“That’s just fantastic. Should we get going soon?” I said.

“Hmm… Taking travel time into consideration, then yes.”

“Cool. Everyone, get dressed,” I said. “We’ll meet back here in the cafeteria when you’re ready.”

It only took us an hour to throw on clothes, venture out into the colony, and arrive at our first stop on our foodie tour.

“Whew… That train was kinda comfortable,” I commented.

“It would have been nice if they accelerated a little more gently…” Mimi said.

“That’s nothing compared to a ship, Mimi,” Elma replied. “Though apparently, some people get sick on trains.”

We’d hopped on one of the trains in the underground freight transport system to traverse this massive colony. It was cheap and fast, but that came at the price of cramped conditions. Each car had a maximum occupancy of six, and the three of us had gotten one to ourselves, but even that felt claustrophobic. There was no window and no view of any scenery, just a speedy, bumpy roller coaster of a train ride.

“So is this the artificial meat plant?” Elma asked, then suddenly froze.

“Hm? What’s up?” I followed Elma’s gaze, but the sign before us looked ordinary enough to me.

“Cierra Corporation Cultured Meat Plant,” I read aloud. *What bothers her about that?*

“I just remembered I have to do some stuff,” Elma muttered. “Have fun without me.”

“Hooold up.” I grabbed Elma by the shoulder before she could flee.

“Cultured meat? That’s not the same as artificial meat, is it?” Mimi cocked her head.

“Elma?”

“I don’t really wanna go in there,” Elma confessed.

“But we made a reservation,” Mimi said. “It’s almost time.”

“Hmm,” I said. “Ah, forget it. Let’s drag her in.”

“No, no, no, no, no…”

We dragged a reluctant Elma into the plant, where a slim man with a pale complexion offered a weird toothy grin from behind the reception desk. *That’s really scary.*

“Welcome! Is this Hiro’s party?” the man asked us.

“Y-yes, sir,” I replied.

“Thank you for choosing our plant’s tour service. Gosh, how long has it been since someone wanted a tour? We’ll bring the whole staff to make it a big merry party!”

“W-wow, crazy,” I said.

His eyes glittered, as if he were a cat sizing up its prey. A huge smile was still stretched across his face. I was beginning to have second thoughts about this.

“Well, don’t be strangers!” he said. “The visitors’ path is right this way. Follow the navigation and enjoy!” He indicated a door that slid open automatically with a click. *It’s nothing to get worked up over; automatic doors are normal. Why is that door so thick, though? What is that, a safe?*

“Master Hiro, let’s go!” Mimi tugged on my hand, unflappable in her excitement.

Elma shrank back. “I-I think I’ll pass, after all…”

“Oh, no,” I said. “You aren’t slipping away that easy.”

“H-hey, you’re too forceful! Stop pulling meee!” Elma yelled.

We made a chain, Mimi tugging me along while I dragged Elma behind me. I needed to keep a hold on both of them so Mimi wouldn’t dash off alone and so Elma wouldn’t flee. *We die together, girls!*

The moment we passed the automatic door, it shut and locked behind us. A mechanical voice addressed us: *“In order to maintain plant hygiene standards, you shall be disinfected. Afterward, you may proceed.”* White smoke hissed into the room. *“Disinfection complete. Please move to the next room.”*

A door opened, allowing us into a smaller chamber without any windows or doors.

“What is this?” I asked.

“Hmm… I don’t see any doors.” Mimi tilted her head to one side.

Elma heaved an exasperated sigh. “We’re gonna regret this.” The moment she said it, the door shut and locked behind us. Then the whole floor began to sway.

“Is the room moving?” I asked.

A voice greeted us from the ceiling. “Thank you for coming to participate in Cierra Corporation’s Cultured Meat Plant tour. Think of this room as a sort of gondola from which you can view the plant.”

“It’s like the whole room itself is a vehicle,” Mimi marveled. How was she the only one not freaked out by this?

“Shame it doesn’t have any chairs,” I said. My hand strayed to the laser on my hip.

“Customers have loved our meat for more than 300 years. We’re a cut above artificial meats, and that’s why an astonishing 93% of our customers come back for more. On this tour, you’ll see the starting cultures for our meat, the entire manufacturing process, and even the shipping department. Please relax and enjoy!”

“Are artificial and cultured meats different?” I asked.

“I suppose so?” Mimi tapped her lips as she thought.

Elma slouched over in a corner of the room, leaning against the wall and closing her eyes. *What's her deal? I'm getting a worse and worse feeling about this.*

"First, let us take a look at the initial cultures," the voice overhead said.

The walls around us went transparent, revealing a factory floor. Conveyor belts moved translucent containers to various stations, where machines squirted liquid into them. Their final destination seemed to be some kind of incubator.

"What do you think that box is?" Mimi asked me, pointing at the incubator.

"I have no idea."

As the room moved on, more incubators appeared. These contained products that had clearly stewed for longer.

"Eugh…" I groaned.

"Wh-what in the world?" Mimi said.

The closer we got, the better we could see into the transparent containers. They held what appeared to be wriggling earthworms but—horrifically—were actually stringy meat.

"I super do not like this," I muttered.

"C-could cultured meat be…?" Mimi craned her neck to keep analyzing the containers as the room moved on.

"This is why I didn't want to come," Elma grumbled, her words hanging in the air.

***

"Thank you again for visiting today. We hope you'll try out our high-quality cultured meat in the near future." I didn't dare turn to look at the creepy receptionist again as we exited the plant. I could picture his smile all too vividly.

“Ulp.” I clapped a hand over my mouth to keep from blowing chunks.

“I-I don’t think I’ll be able to eat meat for some time,” Mimi said.

“This is why I didn’t want to come!” Elma yelled.

The things we witnessed in there… I don’t even want to think about it.

There had been pools of meat-colored tentacle things, some the size of trains. They’d slice the tentacles open and… Ugh, I can’t describe it any further. According to the voiceover in the gondola, those tentacles were actual animals like cows or pigs, just genetically modified to improve edibility. The result was, well, whatever horrors lurked in that factory. They grew quickly into high-quality meat, though, and they supposedly weren’t sentient. I just wished all that genetic engineering could have made them less…disgusting.

I shook my head. “I still don’t get the point of that place.”

“It certainly didn’t stimulate my appetite,” Mimi remarked quietly.

“Once again…” Elma said. “Well, we’re going to some aquaculture place next, right? I hope it’s better.”

Mentally exhausted, we took heavy steps toward our next tour.

I hope it’s better too. A lot better.

***

“This is the, um…Maika Corporation,” Mimi said.

I balked. “*That’s* it?”

“Oh no.”

Elma and I both gaped in horror. The building before us could have been a clone of Cierra Corporation. Maybe it was just because they were both factories, but my stomach tied itself in knots at the sight.

“A-anyway, shall we head in?” Mimi proposed.

I let out a groan. “Ugh, I guess.”

Elma was equally apprehensive. “Sure…”

We stepped inside, resigned to our fate.

“The inside is different,” I said, a note of hope creeping into my voice.

“Indeed,” Elma said.

A bright, clean reception area awaited us. The woman behind the counter addressed us in a calm, businesslike manner. “Welcome. Reservation for Hiro, I presume?” Her neatly pressed uniform complemented her pleasant demeanor—nothing at all like that creepy guy at the meat plant.

“Yes, ma’am,” I said.

“Thank you for choosing us for your farm tour service. Goodness, how long has it been since someone wanted a tour? We’ll have the entire staff… Hm? What’s the matter?”

I winced at the déjà vu her words elicited. The receptionist cocked her head in confusion.

“Well, uh, we just took a tour of the Cierra Corporation’s cultured meat plant,” I said.

The receptionist gasped. “Oh, dear! Those awful people put you through that weird tour, didn’t they? Sorry, it may be rude to speak badly of other companies, but they really are terrible. They even use the same kind of building as us, which does nothing for our reputation.” She then offered a wry grin. “Worry not. Our tour is much less *objectionable*. At the very least, we won’t make you queasy.” Her smile melted away my misgivings.

“I’m holding you to that,” I said.

“No problem, sir. It will be all right. Now, you’ll need to be disinfected at the start of the tour. Please proceed through that door.”

This part, at least, proved the same as the start of the Cierra Corporation tour. *Does this smoke do the disinfecting? Is it okay to breathe it in? It’s not gonna affect my body, is it? Maybe I don’t have to worry, given how advanced the technology is here…*

The similarities ended there. We didn’t enter a weird gondola this time, but rather a glass hallway. This time, we could move at our own pace instead of being shuttled around.

“Wooow, it’s so bright!” Mimi said.

“That it is,” I said. “It’s like real sunlight.”

“They’ve got a description here,” Elma noted. “Mm, it says they use light at a wavelength specialized for growth.”

“Huh. Like a sun lamp, then?” I said.

I’d definitely played a game that had a similar item, allowing players to grow crops regardless of the season. It was a real electricity hog, but that likely wasn’t an issue in this universe. In fact, the Krishna itself contained a generator with more than enough output to power something like that.

“What could they be growing?” Mimi wondered aloud.

“Hmm, I dunno. Watercress, maybe?” I was imagining the kind of watercress that went with steak.

“It says here it’s a high-nutrient vegetable,” Elma said. “Apparently, it’s pretty salty. Guess this is what goes in the food cartridges.” *Hmm, I see. I heard algae and krill were the main ingredients, but I guess they put this in too.*

Everything inside this factory was automated. Drones zipped through the air. Robotic arms helped slide the watercress (or whatever it was) around the farm.

We wandered on until we hit an area full of pools.

“Green pools… Is it algae?” I asked.

“It seems so, yes,” Mimi replied.

Here, the robotic arms cast nets to collect up algae and sprinkled brown powder over the pools.

“What’s that brown powder? Is it manure?”

“Umm…” Elma read the description, then groaned. “Eww.”

That didn’t sound good. “What’s the matter?”

“That’s everyday waste collected from ships,” she said.

“Everyday waste…” Mimi parroted.

“Oh.” *Oh, no.* That brown stuff was ship waste. Not just feces, but also food scraps, bath water, you name it—all the junk a ship had to get rid of. So that was where ours went after the Port Authority collected them. “Well, that’s one way to recycle. It’s the same as manure, in a way.”

“True, I guess…” Elma said reluctantly.

“It still feels rather strange,” Mimi said.

“So you say, but back on my Earth, agricultural manure normally contained certain kinds of feces,” I told her. “I think they used livestock droppings along with plant seeds. They even used human feces a long time ago.”

Of course, I'd never had to actually witness a manure pit back on Earth. Did anyone still use them? Maybe just smaller farmers. I wasn't sure.

"Wow," Elma said. "Yeah, that sounds like an undeveloped planet to me."

"Stop saying that," I said. "It makes me feel really weird even if I can't begin to comprehend this universe's technology."

I tried to put it behind me as we stepped up to a different pool. "Is this one a krill cultivation pool?"

"This one's for animal plankton," Elma said. "Like the others, it uses everyday waste as the feed."

"By the way, I believe they said something similar at the cultured meat plant," Mimi added.

"I didn't have it in me to listen to the explanations there." Those pools of fleshy tentacles flashed through my mind. I could vividly recall the workers hacking pieces off of train-sized tentacle monsters. Ugh, I'd go mad if I kept thinking about it.

Thankfully, the next area looked much more like an ordinary factory.

"Ooh. So this is where they make the food cartridges, right?" I asked.

"Looks like messy work," Elma commented.

"They're tossing all of the ingredients into a processor," Mimi said.

She was right. I watched as ingredients bumped along on a conveyor belt and into a processing machine. They popped out the other side as a familiar paste.

"It's *that* stuff," I muttered.

"Yup, looks like it."

Elma raised an eyebrow. "What's the 'stuff'?"

"Arein Tertius's specialty…"

"Yeah."

Elma gazed at us with a mixture of pity and horror. *I'll never forget the way Mimi's eyes clouded over when she saw that green paste.* No doubt

I looked about the same right now. The mere memory of the taste of those nutritional shakes made my blood run cold.

"So that paste ends up in food cartridges?" Elma said.

"Seems to be the case," I said. "Then it goes through an automatic cooker and into our bellies."

"I don't believe they make high-class cartridges here," Mimi said. Apparently, this plant only produced normal cartridges. The classy stuff cost five times what this would, but they weren't actually five times tastier.

"I'd love to see high-class cartridge production," I said, "but I guess it needs more ingredients or something."

Elma shrugged. "I doubt they're that different, actually."

Next, we reached the cafeteria, where a sign greeted us: *"Enjoy freshly made food cartridges! We're chock-full of automatic cookers manufactured by our partners! Give them a test run. If you find something you love, cartridges and cookers are available for purchase."*

I scanned the cafeteria. Lots of automatic cookers from lots of manufacturers, but no Steel Chef in sight.

"Hey, that's an impressive system."

"Is this how they make a profit with so few guests?" Mimi said.

"Who comes on these tours except for rich people, right? Automatic cookers are expensive, so selling just a few each month probably puts them at a profit," Elma said.

"Fair point," I admitted.

The display also had an array of buttons, one of which was labeled "Press Here for Food Cartridge." I gave it a try. A holographic display appeared before me showing a freshly made food cartridge delivered hot off the assembly line. Ambient music accompanied the video. In the end, my food cartridge appeared from within the wall. The whole thing was kind of hilarious.

Mimi and Elma tried it and got totally different videos and music.

"This is fun!" Mimi said, delighted.

"Some kid would totally press it over and over," Elma added.

“Which one should we try?” Mimi asked when we took our cartridges to the array of cookers.

“Do they differ that much between manufacturers?” Elma said.

“Why don’t we try ordering the same thing on three different machines to compare them?” I suggested.

“Good idea. Let’s go for it,” Mimi said.

We split up to order omurice from three different cookers, and they all finished at the same time. We pooled our spoils, dividing the meals up evenly between everyone.

“Hmm… Wow. They are different,” I said.

“Yeah, right?” Elma agreed. “The flavoring and textures are surprisingly varied.”

“Would it be up to personal taste, then?” Mimi said. “I happen to prefer the Circe Company’s.”

“It’s the Murakumo one for me,” I said.

“I gotta go with the Circe Company too,” Elma said.

The third one, Cimaz Company’s, wasn’t bad either, but it didn’t make the top of anyone’s list.

“Betcha different manufacturers have different specialties.”

“That is possible…” Mimi said.

“We’re not gonna try them all, are we?” Elma said.

Maybe one had better curry over rice, while another had better Japanese-style food. Our Steel Chef was good at everything, it seemed. Not that that came as a surprise—we’d certainly paid for quality with that purchase.

We selected pudding for our dessert, and here Cimaz Company finally shone, lending credence to the theory that different cookers simply had different specialties.

“Do you think richer families might get a few cookers so they can have the best version every time?” I asked the girls.

“As long as they have the space for it, I could see them splurging on a luxury like this,” Elma replied.

“Rather than buying several cookers, wouldn’t buying one high-performance Steel Chef be more economical?” Mimi said.

“Maybe so,” I said. Having so many cookers would require a ton of space, after all, and space came at a premium in this universe. Getting any kind of private residence was a huge cost already.

We lingered a bit longer at the aquaculture farm, enjoying some tea before heading out.

“Al-co-hol! Al-co-hol!” Elma bounced toward our final tour destination: a brewery.

“I hope this one’s normal too,” I said.

“Agreed. I think we’ll be fine, but…” Mimi and I exchanged smiles as Elma skipped ahead of us.

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Ten minutes of dancing through the streets later, we arrived at the brewery.

“It’s the Koryu Beverages factory!” Elma exclaimed. “They’re the biggest brewery in the whole empire! They’ll make any drink in the universe, but their beer is famous for being smooth *and* rich!”

She might as well be the tour guide at this point. Elma was practically sparkling with excitement.

“Hey, Mimi. Is it just me or is Elma glowing?”

“She is. Is this elf magic?”

“Huh, is that a thing? I haven’t heard of it.”

“I don’t know the details, but it seems so, yes.”

For real? I thought she was just a sad little space elf without an ounce of magic, but she knew magic all along?! I shook my head to conceal my shock.

“C’mon, let’s go in! Go, go, hurry up!” Elma charged ahead, her hype at max. I’d never seen her so excited for anything. Mimi and I looked at each other, chuckled, and followed Elma into the plant.

As with the other tours, a receptionist greeted us and showed us to a disinfection room. This time, however, we weren’t the only people on the tour. Most of the others were human (which made sense—humans were the most common species in the Grakkan Empire), but Elma was the only elf. Were elves that rare?

In any case, the other tourists included lizardmen, some amphibious or maybe fishlike race of creatures, sea anemone things, and humanlike beings with animal ears and tails. *Do those anemone things even comprehend speech?*

“Hiro, stop standing around and hurry!” Elma shouted. “We gotta check out the taste-testing station!”

“Hold on, Elma,” I said. “Let them do the tour. If you just wanna drink, then we can do that on the ship.”

“B-but it’s different when it’s freshly made!”

“Just stop rushing, okay? We don’t have any other plans, so we don’t have to hurry.”

“Ugh…” Elma puffed out her cheeks as her ears drooped. She was like a disappointed little kid.

“Are they making ale?” I asked.

“It’s beer,” our tour guide said.

“Oh, beer. Okay.” I always thought of carbonated alcohol as beer and non-carbonated as ale, but that was as deep as my knowledge went. This universe had a distinct lack of carbonation everywhere I looked, though. It was like they were just out to spite me.

“There’s not much to be seen in beer brewing,” I told Elma. “The machines work quickly and precisely, though, so maybe people who are into machinery would find it interesting.”

“Are there people like that?” Elma asked, her expression dubious.

“I rather like it,” Mimi said. “There’s something satisfying about it.”

“I don’t really get it.”

Elma shrugged it off, but I agreed with Mimi. There was something soothing in watching the machines do their methodical work.

Still, we headed off to the next area: the fruit wines. I’d expected large vats full of people stomping on grapes, but the truth was so much weirder.

“Is this an orchard?” I wondered aloud.

A vineyard filled the vast room. Drones and robotic arms buzzed around like busy bees, not dissimilar from the aquaculture farm earlier, in fact.

“Yep,” Elma said. “Here they grow alcoholic fruits. This one must be wine fruit.”

“Wine fruit?” I raised an eyebrow.

“Let’s eat some!” Elma said. “Koryu Beverages makes great wine too.” Through our tablets, we could pay a couple Ener and try out this wine fruit ourselves.

“I’ve never had wine before, so this is kind of exciting,” Mimi said.

While I hesitated, Elma pressed her terminal against a vending machine and received a paper cup containing a single dark-purple fruit the size of a Kyoho grape. She popped the whole thing right in her mouth.

“Mmm,” she moaned. “Wine is good, but the wine fruits are even better. Mimi, try one.”

“Are you sure? Thank you.” Goaded on, Mimi tossed one into her own mouth. “Mmph… It’s not as sour as you’d expect, is it? It’s not acidic at all.”

“When they turn it into wine, they crush the skin and the seeds with it,” Elma told her. “When you eat the fruit, you don’t bother to chew through them completely, right? That’s why you don’t taste the acidity.”

“Wow, how interesting,” Mimi said. “It still smells and tastes like it, though. I like it, but I think I would get drunk if I ate too much.”

“How about you, Hiro?” Elma said. “You might not be a drinker, but you can at least have a bite, right?”

“Probably…”

“There you go. Open up.”

“Aah.” I obediently opened my mouth and Elma tossed in a fruit. The moment I bit down, the flavor of alcohol exploded in my mouth. The juice really was actual wine. “Is the fruit itself alcoholic? Is that even possible?”

“I guess your universe didn’t have these, huh?” Elma said.

“The wine I know is made by taking grapes—kinda like these wine fruits—and crushing, fermenting, compressing, and finally aging them.”

“That’s a pretty traditional—er, *primitive*—way of making it. I heard they did that up until about two thousand years ago. Nowadays, they just make it from wine fruit.”

“So it’s the result of selective breeding or genetic engineering, huh? That’s crazy.” My body warmed as I swallowed down the fruit. Already, a flush had crept onto my face. I really was the easiest drunk.

Mimi gasped. “Master Hiro, you’re all red!”

“Pfft! Aww, how cute.”

“Shut up! My face gets red when I drink, okay? Just one can of beer is enough to get me wasted.”

Mimi smirked at me while Elma giggled and popped another wine fruit in her mouth. I covered my face with my hands, but it only made their smiles widen.

I tried to change topics instead. “Let’s go to the next area, okay?”

“Yeah, yeah. Let’s get to the next one, widdle baby boy.”

“Hee hee!” Mimi giggled. “Widdle baby.”

I left without waiting to see if they followed. *Damn. This might really be my Achilles’ heel.*

The next stop on the tour was supposed to be the fermented liquors section. Except…

“Is it just a forest?” I said.

“They’re spirit trees,” Elma informed me.

“Spirit trees?” I echoed.

“Yep. The natural whiskey that comes out of those trees is top-shelf. Its flavors are a step above the synthetic stuff.”

“Synthetic whiskey, huh?” *Nothing makes sense anymore. What the hell is natural whiskey?!* “Uh, how do they make this stuff?”

“That’s what we’re here to learn! Come on. They have a description over there.” Elma pointed at a holographic video display.

According to the video, the very sap of those spirit trees was natural whiskey, almost like how some maple trees made maple syrup. It was weird to say the least.

The brewery also dabbled in synthetic whiskey as a less costly product offering. Adding flavoring to alcohol produced a credible whiskey flavor. Not as popular as the natural stuff, but a lot more cost-effective.

“Mmm!” Elma smiled big and wide as she downed a shot glass of the good stuff. “Natural really is best!”

“That so?”

“Hrk!” Mimi choked, blinking in surprise. “I-It’s a little too strong for me.”

I patted her on the back while Elma bought a second glass. That elf was going to black out on us if she kept going ham. By the time we finished the tour, Elma was well and truly drunk; even Mimi was wavering a bit.

“Eh heh heh heh… Hirooo…”

“I-I’m sorry, Master Hiro…”

I caught Elma as she tried to cling to me and supported Mimi before she could fall. Incredibly, we shuffled all the way back to the Krishna.

Later, once Elma recovered, she examined her terminal and went pale. Apparently, she’d splurged on some high-quality stuff to the tune of a whopping 100,000 Ener.

“Some nerve you have, paying 100,000 Ener for booze when you haven’t even started paying me back,” I said.

“Ah ha ha… Ha ha ha ha. Forgive meee…” Elma clapped her hands and bowed her head adorably. *Ha ha ha! You little rascal.*

“One week, no alcohol,” I said. “If you sneak any… Heh heh, remember what I did the other day? You’re gonna get that again. Slowly, carefully, and for a *while*. According to Dr. Shouko, people who get used to it get addicted.”

“Eep! I-I won’t drink…” Elma shook her head, tears in her eyes.

I figured I’d been pretty gentle, taking it slow the way I had. *No complaints, got it?*

So went our three days of rest and recuperation. I figured we were doing pretty all right for ourselves. Little did I know the trouble that would arise from our little excursions.

But you know what they say: hindsight is 20/20.

Chapter 5:
Two Trouble-Magnets Attract

THE NEXT DAY marked the beginning of Elma's prohibition.

"Ugh. Nnngh…" She started crying the moment she woke up. Slumped forward in the cafeteria, Elma gazed mournfully at an unopened bottle of expensive, untouched whiskey.

"Is it really worth crying over?" I asked.

"I-I just bought it, and now…" Tears tracked down her cheeks.

I very nearly took pity on her and lifted the prohibition right away. Could I even really stop her from drinking it? She'd bought that whiskey with her own money. Who was I to say she couldn't have it?

I sighed. "Just drink a bit less, okay?"

"C-can I really?" Elma said.

"Next time you get blind drunk, though, it's going right in your butt."

"Urk! I-I'll be careful." Elma's eyes glimmered with hope. She glowed all over with that mysterious, misused magic of hers.

"Master Hiro…" Mimi cut in.

"Don't look at me like that." I couldn't bear the reproach in her gaze. "Anyway, Mimi, what are you up to?"

"I was thinking of relaxing on the ship. After all, I need to work on my operator studies."

"Fair enough. Hmm… What should I do?"

I had yet to find a gaming console in this universe, and I'd never been much of a reader. Maybe in a colony with so much shopping, I could scrounge up something fun, though.

"I might wander around the city for a while. This place seems safe enough."

"Um, are you going alone?" Mimi asked.

“Probably, yeah. There’s nothing wrong with some alone time once in a while.” I’d had precious little solitude since arriving in this universe and inviting Mimi and Elma to join my crew. Flying solo for a bit might let all of us relax for a day.

“Really?” Mimi glanced at Elma.

“I don’t see the problem with him wandering around alone,” Elma said. “Just don’t poke your head into any trouble, bub.”

“I’ll do my best.”

Elma narrowed her eyes at me. What could I say? I certainly wasn’t looking for trouble, but if trouble happened to be looking for me, well, all I could do was my best.

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“Let’s see… Where to go?” I mused.

Where in this big, wide universe might I find a gaming console? I’d take pretty much anything at this point, perhaps even a book.

“But print books are kinda…eh.”

Books ate up space quickly. If I started hoarding print books, the Krishna could get cramped. “No books, then. Okay.” Digital was probably a better option for reading, anyway.

I wandered along, tapping at my terminal, trying to suss out anything that might be a gaming retailer. Abruptly, the bright lights of the colony went dark. I looked up and found myself alone in an empty alley.

That’s what I get for having my nose in my phone.

“Wait!” a woman yelled.

“Why would I wait just because you told me to?!” a rough-sounding man replied.

Gee, it sure feels like this has happened before. Also, that voice sounds familiar. Am I just imagining it?

I peeked around the corner of the alley and found a woman in a disheveled white coat. Her brown braid slapped against her back as she fled, and her breasts bounced frantically as she went. *Dammit.* I couldn't just leave her. I heaved a sigh, unholstered my laser gun, and dashed around the corner. The woman stumbled to a stop when I appeared. "Eep!"

"Wha—?!" Her pursuer dropped down the moment he spotted my gun, reaching into his pockets. He was too quick and too smooth to be some fumbling amateur.

I caught the woman before she fell, firing a warning shot at her attacker as I did. The projectile grazed his cheek.

"Put your hands behind your head and get on your knees, slowly," I said. "Do anything weird, and I won't hold back. The next one's going right into your forehead."

The man froze before slowly lowering to one knee and raising his hands to clasp them behind his head.

"Y-you're…"

The woman in my arms squirmed, and we locked eyes. Recognition dawned on her instantly. Dr. Shouko blinked at me with a mixture of astonishment and fear, then relaxed a little.

"I don't know what's going on, but just turn around and get out of here," I told her pursuer. "Don't try anything weird either. Remember your manners and be a good boy now."

The man glared daggers in my direction, refusing to back down. He squinted, then pointed right at me. His hand bent away in the wrong direction as a gun barrel sprouted from his wrist. *Laser gun in his left arm, huh? What is he, a cyborg?*

He flew into motion, fast and fluid, but I was faster. I leveled my laser at him before he got very far.

"Gah?!"

An explosion bloomed from his mechanical wrist as I shot his arm-gun. He struck the wall behind him, slumping to the ground in a heap. Dr. Shouko gasped, clinging to me in fear, pushing that voluptuous chest against me. *Oho! Those are some Mimi-tier knockers. How excellent.*

“D-did you just kill him?”

“Who knows? If he’s lucky, he might still be alive.” Alive or not, he wouldn’t leave this encounter unscathed. “Was he the only person following you?”

“I-I dunno,” she managed to say. “I just ran for my life…”

“I see.” *What now? Staying here would be a bad move, but we can’t just leave that guy. Self-defense or not, if we leave him, and he dies, that would definitely be a crime.* “Dr. Shouko, we need to do something about that guy. Should we call the police?”

“G-good idea. I think we should, yes. Unfortunately, I kinda dropped my terminal.”

“I’ll call them.”

I kept my laser trained on the attacker as I called the police through my terminal. *Dr. Shouko, please. You’re not a child. You don’t have to… Okay, fine, you can cling to me. I don’t mind!*

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“Hats off to you, Mr. Trouble Magnet,” a certain elf groaned.

“What can I say? I attract trouble as naturally as I breathe.”

I’d messaged Elma and Mimi after contacting the authorities. They’d arrived while I was still explaining the situation to the cops. The girls both shot looks at Dr. Shouko when they saw the way she was clinging to me.

“Look, it’s not what you think,” I said.

“I’m getting tired of that excuse.” Elma glared nearly as hard as that attacker had.

Mimi only offered a strained laugh. “Ah ha ha…”

Dr. Shouko glanced between the three of us. “No, it honestly isn’t his fault. I just got him wrapped up in it… Actually, y’know what? Maybe it is his fault.”

"Bwuh?" *Hey, what the heck?!*

"See, I was taking his genetic data to my lab to analyze it," Dr. Shouko said. "That's when I got attacked. In a way, you could say he indirectly caused this."

"Wait. Did they steal my genetic data?" I asked.

"Oh, yeah," Dr. Shouko said. "But I put it in a special security case so they won't be able to access it easily. It also has a tracking device on it. We can find it pretty quickly; don't worry."

"That's good, at least. Were you seriously carrying it alone, though?"

"Yep. Since I was headed to the lab, I decided to take it with me. Then these strange men attacked me. They took the case and tried to abduct me, but I narrowly escaped. That last one there was so stubborn. And just when I thought I was done for, Hiro swept in and saved me." Dr. Shouko tightened her hold on me. I would have enjoyed it if it weren't for the dour looks Mimi and Elma shot in my direction.

"Dr. Shouko, that's how he gets you," Elma said, pinching my cheek. "We both fell for it once."

"Elma, no…" Mimi chided her.

I did not care for that particular insinuation. I really hadn't orchestrated any of these strange rescues. It was just a weird coincidence that I'd had to save three different women from three different dire situations. Wait, did Lieutenant Serena count too? I had kind of cleaned up in that battle back in the Tarmein System.

"Oh, really?" Dr. Shouko said, cocking her head. *What a tease!*

The cops were starting to notice the display as well. I did not appreciate the way they narrowed their eyes at me, gazes boring into me. I could almost hear them calling me a popular normie in their heads and telling me to spontaneously combust.

"Can I just say that I didn't intend for any of this to happen?" I offered. "I mean, I couldn't cause all this if I tried."

"That's probably true," Dr. Shouko admitted.

Perhaps it was enough to save my reputation. I mean, if anyone here was attracting trouble, it was the good doctor herself. First that pirate attack, and now this?

"How should we search for my data?" I asked.

"It'll probably fall to the colony's police and Inagawa Tech's specialists to handle that," she said. "Inagawa might even send a recovery request to the mercenary guild."

"I won't be the one accepting that request, just so you know,"

"They probably won't send it to you since it's a conflict of interest. If the security case is opened and your data gets leaked, Inagawa has to pay out reparations to you. It wouldn't really help us to offer you the job while simultaneously giving you an opportunity to profit from botching it."

"That makes sense," I said.

If that case wasn't recovered, I was entitled to 30,000,000 Ener, after all. I couldn't blame Inagawa Technologies for doubting whether I'd really put my heart into the job.

"I guess I'll leave it to you guys, then," I said. "Uh, should I walk you home? Will you be okay?"

"Oh, boy. Are you gonna walk me home just to do something dirty to me?" Dr. Shouko teased.

"I'm honestly worried, okay?"

"Ha ha, I'm just kidding! I'll be fine, though. I had the police contact Inagawa's security department, so they'll come to pick me up soon. Oh, speak of the devil." Several people in body armor approached the police, displaying the credentials on their handheld terminals.

"Why didn't you have them come with you in the first place?"

"It takes a lot of annoying procedures to get them to do stuff," she said, "and a lot of time. Nobody anywhere is supposed to know about the data, so I didn't think anyone would come after me."

"Dr. Shouko…"

Her shoulders slumped, and she heaved a sigh. "Yeah, I know. I feel bad."

I almost pitied her. No doubt her employer would have some stern words for her about this. Besides, if I hadn't been around, what would've happened to her? There was no time to consider it, though; the Inagawa Tech guys strode toward us, interrupting our conversation.

"Doctor, the higher-ups are furious, you know," one of them said. He wore a helmet that obscured his whole face. His voice emerged from somewhere within it, mechanical and tinny.

"Yeah, yeah, I know. Ugh. Oh, and Hiro—thanks again."

"No prob. Be careful out there, though I'm sure you don't need me to tell you that."

"Yeah, yeah," she said, leaving with her armored entourage. The police hauled away the attacker as well, leaving just me, Mimi, and Elma.

"Welp, let's get going," I said, but the moment I attempted to do just that, the girls seized me by the arms.

"Where do you think you're going?"

"We don't know what trouble you might get up to by yourself, Master Hiro. We're coming with you now."

"You can't even walk alone in a colony this secure," Elma said, shaking her head. "That's some kind of talent."

"I'm innocent, I swear!"

My cries did not sway their cold hearts. In the end, my solo day was not quite as solitary as I might have hoped. To make matters worse, I never did find any sort of gaming console. Apparently, they'd faded into obscurity long ago, eclipsed in power by desktop terminals and other technology. If I wanted to game, I'd need to attach a controller to a desktop.

So much for my grand plans.

Chapter 6:
The Pirate Hunting Unit

I WASN'T ABOUT TO MAKE the same mistake two days in a row. Thus, the next day, I resigned myself to staying aboard the ship. Mimi was just helping me figure out her favorite e-book-reading app when someone came knocking at the Krishna's door.

Is it Dr. Shouko? Was she freed from her mountain of apology letters already?

I cringed the moment I recognized the person on the holo display.

"It's been quite a while, silver rank Captain Hiro." A prim woman with golden-blonde hair, red irises, and a white military uniform complete with a red cape smirked at me. This woman was as beautiful as she was dangerous.

Lieutenant Serena.

The blood drained from my face. No matter how hard I blinked, she remained stubbornly real on the holo display. I had no choice but to scrounge together some appropriate clothing and face her.

"Oh, my," she said when I invited her into the ship. "What a lovely automatic cooker you have here."

"Well, thank you," I said, mouth dry.

The best the Krishna could do in terms of a reception room was the cafeteria. Lieutenant Serena took her seat as though she were in the grand lobby of some fancy hotel and sipped the tea Mimi offered her. Then Mimi came around to join me and Elma on the opposite side of the table.

"So, er… What brings you here?" I tried.

Lieutenant Serena smiled, setting down her tea. As mercs, we didn't have any fancy teaware.

"Ha ha. I came here to invite you, of course," she said.

My crew and I exchanged glances, a single thought striking all of us at once: *How persistent is this lady?*

"I'm the kind of woman who never lets my prey escape," Serena said as though reading our minds. Her smile sent chills down my spine. Mimi and Elma wrapped their arms around me as though shielding me from the lieutenant. "Well, they clearly don't approve."

"Girls, please. Don't be rude," I said.

Mimi and Elma reluctantly backed off. I immediately missed the comfort of their touch, but I couldn't face down Serena that way.

"I think I've refused a few times already, but again, I don't plan to join the Imperial Fleet," I said.

"Yes, I'm aware. It's quite disappointing." Serena sighed, but her dismay was so obviously rehearsed that I couldn't take it seriously. "I've been forced to give up on that goal. I wouldn't want the mercenary guild to badger me about my forceful recruiting methods, after all. I'd prefer to be on good terms with them."

"Go on." In that case, why come all this way? "You're not here to flaunt the Empire's noble authority, I assume."

"Oh, I would never. If I did, you would flee to the Belbellum Federation, wouldn't you?"

I held my tongue, which perhaps was answer enough.

"Incidentally, I've been promoted," she went on. "They were impressed by my work in the defense of Tarmein Prime. See, the insignia on my badge has even changed. Now you may call me Lieutenant Commander Serena Holz."

"Congratulations for that," I said flatly.

She tapped at her badge, nodding to acknowledge my congratulations. But surely she hadn't come all this way just to gloat.

"My promotion is partly thanks to your efforts during that fight, Captain Hiro. How *strangely* fortunate for us to be aided by crystal life-forms, hmm?"

“I assure you it was just luck,” I said. “I had just charged into the enemy line at that point, so I was downright terrified.” Cold sweat trickled down my back. She couldn’t prove I’d used a Singing Crystal to summon those beasts, right?

“Heh heh, but of course,” she said. “It was just good timing. Don’t worry. I’m not interested in probing too deeply into that.” Lieutenant Commander Serena smiled as if to say *You owe me one*. Frankly, that seemed a little unfair to me. If I hadn’t acted when I did, her fleet would have suffered huge losses and damages. Wasn’t she the one in my debt?

“Ha ha. I don’t know what you’re talking about, but if my work has helped you somehow, then that’s just great,” I said.

“Heh heh heh.”

“Ha ha ha…”

Mimi trembled at the sound of our awkward, unnatural laughter, but I refused to back down. Serena wouldn’t lead me around by the nose ever again. I was on my guard this time.

“So how about we get down to brass tacks?” I prompted.

“Sure,” Serena said. “With my advancement, I’ve also been charged with a new force to lead.”

“Congratulations for that too, I think?”

“Yes, thank you. I’m very excited about it. The Empire has granted my request for an independent cohort for the sole purpose of pirate hunting, and I’ve been tasked with leading them.”

“Wait, *only* pirate hunting?”

“Yes. In simple terms, the Imperial Fleet is divided into two sections. One is for defense and stays stationed at colonies and strongholds. The other is a mobile force that actively seeks out enemies and carries out incursions.”

“I see.”

“The Imperial Fleet—our defensive side—wields great power, but we often have to spread it thin to cover our territory. As such, proactively hunting pirates and space monsters is a risky venture that puts us on the

back foot. In the worst of times, this leads to casualties and the weakening of national security. Unless we're able to form an airtight plan and back it up with fire power, the Imperial Fleet looks vulnerable and open to attack."

"I can understand that."

Pirates would swarm the moment they smelled weakness in the Imperial Fleet. Any kind of gap in the defenses could entice enemies in neighboring systems looking for quick scores. It would hamper all of the fleet's operations, defensive and offensive. If that went on long enough, if pirates and others truly believed they'd caught the Imperial Fleet out, it could even provoke an attack on one of the colonies.

"But that doesn't mean that the mobile force is free to move as it pleases. It is both the Empire's strongest offense and a component of its defense. Moving comes at great cost, as other nations could attack us if we're not careful."

"So basically, you need more mobile forces," I said. "Right now, mercenaries are making up the deficit."

"That is correct," she said. "The goal of my new pirate hunting squad is to fight space pirates ourselves instead of relying on mercenaries."

"I see. But this still doesn't explain why you needed to come all this way to talk to me."

Her mobile force sounded nice and all, but it would also be a rival for local mercenaries, who would likely need to travel elsewhere to scoop up bounties. Anywhere Serena went would be slim pickings for mercs. I couldn't see why she'd come all this way to deliver that information to me, personally, though.

"Yes, well, I'm here to recruit you," Serena said.

My eyes narrowed. Hadn't I turned her down enough?

"Your outright refusal only makes me more—urk! Forget I said that," Serena said. "Anyway, I have a request for you. It's something that only a professional pirate hunter can help me with."

"A request, eh? What are the details?" She could make a request through the guild, but this sounded a lot fishier than the official routes.

“The Imperial Fleet has expertise in traditional battles,” Serena said, “but we lack experience and knowledge when it comes to the guerrilla-style fighting one might employ against pirate ships.”

“Yeah, figures,” I said.

A big lumbering imperial squad would have a tough time catching small mobile groups of space pirates who could simply run away and hide at the moment Serena showed up.

“As such, we would like a professional such as yourself to teach us the necessary skills to exterminate pirates.”

“Gotcha.”

“And?” Lieutenant Commander Serena looked at me expectantly.

“I respectfully decline.”

Her face froze around a tight, tense smile. “M-might I ask why?”

“I mean, I don’t have to accept it. Why not just go to the mercenary guild and ask them to teach you? They’d be able to give you a much better teacher than a guy with no military background like me.” It also sounded annoying as hell, though I couldn’t really tell her that.

Serena hadn’t made any mention of compensation, but I had to imagine we could make more money more quickly by hunting pirates ourselves. I also had no idea how long this little training class might last. The longer it dragged on, the more it hurt my bank account.

“I’d like to learn all you can teach me.”

“Not into it.”

“Why are you so stubborn?” Lieutenant Commander Serena puffed out her cheeks adorably. *Wow, gorgeous women can make any face they want and still look good, huh?*

I couldn’t exactly explain that I was digging my heels in because I found her annoying, so I searched for some other reason that might placate her. She was imperial nobility, after all. She might slap me with a defamation suit if I said the wrong thing.

Thus, I told her, “It’s because I don’t expect to be sufficiently compensated for the amount of time I’ll have to put into it. Really, why are

you so fixated on me?"

"I like your way of thinking and your willingness to stand out," Serena said matter-of-factly. "Among all the mercenaries we commanded, you were the only one to propose your own independent strategy. It was reckless at first glance, but you did it—you got out, and you won the day."

Is she complimenting me? Why does that freak me out?

"And the crystal life-form attack," she continued. "You used a Singing Crystal, didn't you? Sorry, you don't have to answer that. I don't have proof, after all. I believe that a man willing to use such a bold, ruthless strategy without hesitation would be able to teach us the best way to obliterate the pirate scum. That's why I'm fixated on you. In truth, I would love to have you as a subordinate, but I assume you're not interested in that, are you?"

"Nope. Not into it." That was twice today I'd turned her down. She really didn't fold easily.

"I'll give up on that front, but in return, I want you to help me. If the military's reward isn't enough, then I am willing to personally compensate you. After all, I am the daughter of a marquess and a field officer of the Imperial Fleet. Having me as a connection would be awfully helpful, don't you think?" She punctuated this statement with a downright wicked smile.

I glanced at Mimi, but she just shrugged. Elma leaned a little closer and whispered, "I think it might lead to more trouble if you reject her after all that."

I still didn't like it, but Elma was probably right. Serena had traveled all this way to personally deliver the message this time. That was a lot of effort to go to just to get a no.

"Okay, but you owe me." I sighed. "Make sure to send the contract through the guild, okay? I think they have a system that lets you request me specifically. Now, the rewards?"

"You'll receive junior lieutenant pay for a period of…let's say thirty days. Your only superior in the squad will be me."

"I don't want the fleet trying to assimilate me or whatever. No matter what, I'm clocking out at a set time. You get ten hours a day and not a

minute more."

"Tch… Very well."

"Also," I continued, "all of my knowledge is specific to mercenary work—as in hunting pirate ships alone. I plan to do my best with this job, but I can't guarantee that I'll help you become a fantastic squad leader."

"Of course. I can understand that. We need to be able to digest your teachings and use them well. Our captains are excellent, so you've no need to worry." Lieutenant Commander Serena's smile turned sweeter. Seemed her mood was improving as I gave ground in these negotiations.

"So again, the rewards," I prodded. "Elma, what would a good amount be?"

"It's hard to tell. Mercenaries aren't usually asked to teach the military, so I don't have a precedent to work with. But if this were a bodyguard request for a certain number of days, it would be somewhere between thirty and fifty thousand."

"This job poses no danger to your life, so wouldn't you expect a little less?" Serena asked. "Besides, the reward comes with a premium, as it's meant for parties of ships who can perform bodyguard duty."

She's shrewd for sure. I guess I should've done some research in advance.

"But Hiro can get 200,000 *daily* from pirate hunting," Elma argued. "Getting less than a quarter of that is just stupid. We're mercs, not charity workers. If we don't profit, we don't work. You should know that."

We didn't actually make 200,000 Ener every day, and we took days off pretty often. Still, Elma was right. Taking this job would cut us off from more lucrative gigs for a month.

Serena let out a grunt of frustration at our haggling. "What about 40,000 Ener a day?"

"We don't get out of bed for less than 60,000 Ener," Elma declared.

"Why don't we meet in the middle? 50,000." Serena crossed her arms. This was likely her final offer.

Elma glanced at me. I shrugged, leaving it up to her.

“Fine, that works,” Elma said. “Hiro, do you have anything to add?”

“I can’t plan any strategies without knowing what their ships can do, so I’ll need ship blueprints and weapon specs ahead of time. I’d also like to test your pilots in simulators.”

“I will give you as much as I can make public,” Serena said. “As for the simulators, I can send ship data regarding our enemies to the mercenary guild in advance.”

“Sounds to me like we have a deal,” Elma said. “Send all the details through the mercenary guild.” Elma looked plenty pleased with herself, but I had a queasy feeling lurking in the pit of my stomach. With this, we’d become Serena’s underlings.

“So now that we’re done talking about work… Can I ask you a few things while you’re here?”

Serena hesitated. “As long as I’m able to answer them.”

“Awesome. It’s no big deal, though—or I guess it is.” I stumbled over my words. “It’s just kinda bothering me. Do you remember the mercenary ship that crashed into the Imperial Fleet during the pirate crackdown back in Tarmein Prime?”

“Yes, I do,” Serena said. “I warned them not to charge the pilot for that incident, but due to some mistakes, they saddled her with an impossible repayment deadline. I do believe Elma was the pilot of that ship, yes?”

“Great, you do know. That’ll make this faster. I wanted to ask, just in case: Were there any mistakes in the calculated reparations?”

“None at all,” Serena said. “I triple-checked the numbers myself. There was an issue with the deadline, as I mentioned, but that is all. I can’t annul the debt now, and I can’t return it, so don’t ask, if that’s where this is going. I will apologize regarding the issue, but those responsible have been terminated from their positions. Frankly, it was their way of harassing me, so I should be grateful to you for giving me an opportunity to deal with them.”

“You’re awfully unapologetic for almost getting her jailed and then some.”

“Well, yes. I’m not at fault for what happened. It was her mistake that nearly destroyed an imperial battleship. I’ll have you know that people often get tried for felony in such cases. After all, her mistake nearly caused the destruction of a ship *and* badly wounded many of our troops.”

“Hmm… Fair enough.” Maybe debt alone was the best-case scenario for us, after all.

“I can only apologize for the nature of the deadline, but those are decided at the fleet’s discretion. Typical cases run between a few months to a year, but that’s not an absolute. In the most egregious cases, the fleet will set shorter deadlines, such as the one you dealt with. It’s a case-by-case decision, and I urged them to be lenient, but they ignored me. However, you could say that I’ve expressed my goodwill already by canning the people at fault for the whole ordeal.”

Hmm. I still don’t like it, but maybe this is normal in a society where nobility and the army hold all the power.

“Hiro, it’s okay. We all know I messed up and, I mean…I don’t mind how things ended up with us working together.” Elma smiled a little, tugging at my arm. *Hmm… If she says so, then I guess there’s no point in fighting Serena on it.*

“Ha ha! Captain Hiro, you’re quite the thoughtful one,” Lieutenant Commander Serena said. “I have good news for you, by the way.” She grinned and it made my stomach lurch. “Once you’ve completed this request, I would like to offer you a position as my own contracted mercenary.”

I blinked at the lieutenant commander, my mouth falling open.

“Goodness,” Serena said. “This is the first time anyone’s ever looked so disgusted by me.”

Did I look that sour? Serena seemed like she was fighting not to grimace, but could she blame me? Her proposal sounded more like a prison sentence.

“I might as well ask. What’s in it for me?”

“I appreciate the straightforward question,” she said. “First, by becoming my contracted mercenary, you’ll find it very difficult to run into

trouble with imperial nobility or the army. I'm both a lieutenant commander and Marquess Holz's daughter, after all. Anyone who wants to bother my mercenary will have to go through me."

"Uh-huh. But that also means anyone who doesn't like you will also dislike me, right?"

"It's not impossible, but I doubt anyone like that exists," Serena said. "If you run into any trouble, you can let me know and I'll deal with it to the best of my ability."

"To the best of your ability, huh?"

"Yes. Is that a problem?"

"Nah. Now let's talk about the downsides." For once during this strange negotiation, I leaned back in my chair and relaxed. If she was making this kind of request, there was no need to keep kissing ass.

She returned my smile. *Two smiling friends, that's all we are.* Mimi, on the other hand, trembled beside me.

"Downsides? Whatever could you mean?" Serena asked, feigning innocence.

"Ha ha ha, funny joke. Seriously, I'm not here to be your little puppet. You owe me already, so I'm not going to keep helping you out before you repay me."

"Oh? But making you my mercenary would be repaying you, no?"

"Is that how you're trying to seduce me now? Pretty bold of you to say that you'd be paying me back by contracting me. As a noble and a military woman, you made a concession to us, and I paid you back in kind. That's all. Like Elma said before, this reward is lower than low for us. Normally, I wouldn't even listen to you. You still owe me."

Serena groaned, but I ignored her.

"If I get in trouble with nobility or the army, I can just run away if I need to. Being protected from that stuff isn't much of a benefit. You say you don't have enemies, but I'm not buying it. Anyone who doesn't like you or your father will be on my ass. Besides, just being your contracted mercenary limits what I can do, right? At that point, there are too many downsides. As you know, my methods are pretty unorthodox. I'm assuming

that's not gonna fly if I'm working for you. The moment I step out of line, you can just cut me off, and I'll be left high and dry. Doesn't seem like a very lucrative deal to me. Any rebuttal?"

Serena's face flushed, lips pressing into a thin line. *Is she mad? Sorry, I've just got a whole bunch of pent-up anger. After all those annoying spam messages, you come here and toss this crappy request in my lap. Think about how I feel!*

"H-hey, Hiro," Elma said. "That was just—"

"You're the first person who's ever spoken to the daughter of Marquess Holz so foolishly." Lieutenant Commander Serena snorted a laugh, but red still lingered in her heated cheeks. "But very well. I'll forgive you, as you do have a point. Sometimes, trying too hard to get something will only lead to ruining it. A cute lap kitty can't match up to the strength of a stray, after all."

"Who are you calling a stray cat?"

"One doesn't need a collar to domesticate a pet as long as they have food. The collar can wait until after I've tamed you with treats."

"Are you trying to literally put a collar on me?"

"Yes. Like I said, I don't let my prey escape." She rubbed across her lips with a finger. I couldn't tell if that hungry gaze was anger or arousal, but both terrified me.

Mimi and Elma wrapped their arms around me in solidarity.

Serena just smiled. "For today, I'll be satisfied that you accepted the request. I will send it through to the mercenary guild, so please be sure to formally accept it. I'll also provide them with the necessary data."

"Sure. I'll watch my language at work, but forgive me if I get a little high-strung."

"Oh, that's no problem. You're very free to talk as you please in a private setting."

"Ha ha ha, gotcha." *Wait a minute. Private setting?!*

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“I can’t believe you talked to her like that. I was scared outta my mind!” Elma told me.

We lingered in the cafeteria after Serena departed, eating our lunch. Elma picked at a bang bang chicken salad with Japanese-style noodles. I had a hamburger, fries, and a milkshake. The shake smelled a little off, but it was way better than that stuff down in the colony.

“If that was enough to make her go mad and break things off, then it wouldn’t have worked out anyway,” I reasoned. “In fact, the way she smiled and forgave me shows that she’s serious about this. We don’t want to get tripped up because we were careless, so it’s best to avoid verbal promises.”

“I don’t like her. She’s dangerous,” Mimi said, prodding at her ketchup-drenched omurice.

C’mon, Mimi. She’s hot and she’s got big bazonkers, but I won’t fall for her traps that easily. I’m not like that. Don’t worry about me.

“Anyway, you’ll be training for a while,” I said. “Since I’ll have my hands full with the request, I figure you’ll keep working on your operator studies, Mimi. Elma, I hope you’ll help Mimi out during that month.”

“Sure,” Elma said. “I don’t have much else to do. Not *every* day can be exciting, even for a merc. But Hiro, make sure you train so your skills don’t get rusty, okay?”

“I’ll do what I can. I’ve already been thinking about it.”

If I just lectured on a whiteboard, I’d be nothing more than an armchair theorist. No, we’d need mock battles and simulations to really make any progress.

“But hey, if I’m gonna do this job, then I’m gonna take it seriously,” I said. “Besides, it’s zero danger, and I get to have a lieutenant commander indebted to me. We get a little bit of cash to sweeten the deal too. Meanwhile, Mimi gets to keep studying. Sounds great to me!”

“Master Hiro?” Mimi said, looking up from under her lashes.

“Yeah?”

“Be careful, okay?”

“You betcha.” Was Mimi especially wary of Serena, or did she not trust me? Hopefully the former. *Please tell me it’s the former.*

“Don’t let that marquess’s daughter make you her bitch,” Elma said bluntly.

“You don’t trust me at all!”

“It already happened once!”

Ouch. “I have no rebuttal.”

I spent the rest of the day trying to repair Mimi’s and Elma’s sour moods, shutting us in the Krishna for a cozy, lazy day. We had to indulge while we could. Soon, I’d be spending whole days away from them and in Serena’s service instead.

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Mimi and Elma slipped right into their temporary roles, devoting their time to training and learning even before I left the ship. As for me…

“Eugh. Nobles are crazy,” I groaned.

Elma had suggested for (read: forced) me to watch a documentary-style compilation of nobility-related problems and shenanigans in the Grakkan Empire. In her own words: “Your attitude toward nobility terrifies me. If you’re not careful, you could have all of us tried for slander. Learn to talk to nobles!”

I found it annoying at first, but the longer I watched, the more horrified I became. Apparently, nobles could actually murder common folk without any consequences as long as they provided even the flimsiest of excuses. And I do mean flimsy. Stuff like “they were a villain,” “they insulted me,” and “I did it to avenge the Grakkan Empire.”

To make matters worse, other nobles served as judge and jury in those kinds of cases. The noble in charge of the territory where the murder took place got to mete out justice—and they’d almost always side with their fellow nobility.

The imperial government did have some power over the nobles. They too could decide it was time to "avenge the Grakkan Empire," and citizens were a major asset to the emperor. Plus, imperial nobility still valued reputation and honor. Tossing around their authority too much wasn't a good look for anyone and could even get them shunned by other nobles.

It all struck me as a pretty delicate balance to maintain. Even a whiff of corruption could bring it all crashing down, and since it was clearly intact, they must have been doing something right.

"Nobles are *insane*," I said to Elma, surely (not) wowing her with my colorful vocabulary.

Elma just sighed, as if to say *See? I told you so.*

"Yeah, they're insane," Elma muttered. "You need to pick your words better."

"I'll try to do better next time. A little late for Serena, though, right?"

"It may be, but it's best to err on the side of caution. If anyone has a sword at their hip, they're probably nobility. Keep an eye out for that."

"Gotcha." The sword was apparently a symbol of their honor or whatever. Maybe it was akin to a samurai's katana.

"Most of the Grakkan Empire's nobility are decent people, so you shouldn't have to worry too much…but some of them are complete idiots. The best thing you can do is avoid interacting with them. Though they probably wouldn't come near a mercenary unless they had some business with you."

"Really?" I raised an eyebrow.

"Unlike normal people, mercs walk around with lasers, most of us know how to fight, *and* we have ships loaded with weapons. If nobles caused trouble with us, it could easily blow up in their faces. If a noble tries to slice you, just shoot them with your gun. In the worst case, you get in your ship and dogfight. We're scared of nobility, but they're scared of us too."

"Huh. I get it. It'd be a different story if we were defenseless herbivores, but you wouldn't want to corner a hungry wolf."

“Weird example, but kinda? Like I said before, you can’t be rude to nobility.”

“I’ll keep that in mind. I don’t wanna die, after all.” I certainly didn’t want to end up on the wrong end of their swords.

“I should’ve noticed this earlier.” Elma shook her head. “Amnesiac or visitor from another world, it’s obvious that you’d be short on common sense. I should’ve started teaching you common sense and social norms sooner.”

“I know you didn’t mean to be rude, but that felt mean.” *How should I know common sense?! This stuff wasn’t in* Stella Online*!* “Really, though, this world’s common sense just seems bizarre from my perspective. How is it obvious that a guy has to be sleeping with the girls on his ship? What is this, a porn game?”

“Interstellar travel is faster now thanks to hyperdrive functionality, but a long time ago, it took a month or two most of the time. Mercenaries were mostly rowdy men, so taking a woman onto your ship for a month or two… Wouldn’t you think that something was up?”

“Yeah, true, I guess.” All that time stuck together in close quarters—things were bound to happen eventually. If a man didn’t make a move in that situation, people would doubt his sexuality…or his virility.

“There you go, then,” Elma said with a nod. “When a girl gets on a guy’s ship, most people assume that she’s ready and consenting. It’s a tradition at this point.”

“I see. Well, I’ll do my best to pick up this kind of stuff in the future.”

“You do that. Trust me, the effort won’t go to waste.”

It wouldn’t be easy changing my natural tendencies at my age, but I had to learn the social norms here if I was going to survive. Still…

Elma, can’t you at least find stuff other than children’s books to teach me with?

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I got in a good week of studying, and in all that time, none of us suffered any side effects from our vaccines. I never did hear from Inagawa Technologies, though. What had happened to my genetic data? *Ah, whatever. It's not worth panicking and bothering them about it.*

Okay, I said about a week, but I really only studied for the first two days. After that, I pored over the info Serena had sent me about her squad. It allowed me to set up simulations at the mercenary guild and run them using the Krishna's data.

Today, it was finally time to put all that prep to good use.

"I'm Captain Hiro, and I'll be advising you for a few weeks," I announced. "Let's get this bread."

I stood next to Lieutenant Commander Serena on the flagship's bridge and addressed her recruits. Some sat in the briefing room with us, while others joined via video conference.

"I hear this squad was formed to turn every last pirate from space pest into space debris. I'm a mercenary, so this is my specialty. That's why she's invited me to be your advisor."

I continued, "I'll teach you all how to hunt them, fool them, and chase them down. You'll take in that information and apply it through simulations. I don't think you'll be able to learn my methods directly, since I'm a mercenary, but the concepts should still translate. As long as we respect each other as pirate fighting comrades, we should make it through this just fine."

I paused, and my array of students applauded. *Thanks for your pity, guys. I'll do my best.*

"Whenever you want to do something, you have to learn the basics. Let's start with identifying what a space pirate is." Pirate ship data filled the holographic display beside me. "Pirates often roam in groups of three to five ships. Numbers are important, as they need a few ships to surround their prey. They typically use optical weapons, seeker missiles, and multi-cannons. They're all Class I to Class II low-power weapons, but they like to really cram stuff into their weapon slots, so they can pack a punch. A few ships will surround you while the beefed-up ones try to exhaust your shields and capture you. That's their usual plan of attack."

The men and women of the class nodded along. These weren't exactly state secrets I was dishing out. Anyone who'd ever encountered a space pirate knew this stuff.

"Next, they usually use private ships that they've captured and remodeled. As a result, they have lower mobility. Most customizations go toward adding weapons and thrusters, meaning they're lacking in armor and shields. They're built for speed first and foremost. The longer a hit takes, the more likely it is that imperial ships or mercenaries will find them. They add enough strength to suppress private ships, but then the focus is on getting away. If their prey bites back or they're caught up in an attack, they're sitting ducks."

It was no surprise to see my students nodding along. They likely knew how easily their military-grade weapons could blast through flimsy pirate shields and armor.

"As you might guess, pirates are terrified of the Imperial Fleet," I said. "They don't go anywhere you might show up, and the first thing they do when you show up is *run*. They don't wanna die, after all. To be honest, they would probably turn tail even if they were in the middle of a hit."

"Yes," Serena chimed in. "You can expect that they won't fight back. The only time they'll try to attack us is when we raid their bases."

"Pretty much," I said. "They're constantly scanning for imperial ships, and they've got eyes and ears in the colonies. Heck, they probably already know that something is going on here, since all your ships are docked outside."

"Er…"

"I don't think you could've done anything about it," I told Serena. "They're always slipping in with merchants and normal people, gathering whatever info they can. More of them are lurking in large colonies like this one, so I doubt you could find every single one. But hey, that's outside my jurisdiction. I'm just here to tell you about the ones *in* the ships."

"I see. Perhaps we should address that at a later time," Serena said.

"Good luck with that. Moving on…" I displayed a map of the Tarmein System. "A while back, we destroyed a pirate base under Lieutenant Commander Serena's leadership here in this system. Here's a

distribution that shows where pirate ships ran into private ships, where mercenaries destroyed pirate ships, and the expected routes of ships that went missing."

Dots marked the locations I pointed out with flight paths crisscrossing over the map. At the center of it all sat the pirate base, a flurry of dots and lines that marked the battle there.

"Here's how it looked *after* we destroyed their base." I tapped my terminal a few times, and the map changed. "You can see the difference, right? Add in data of where the Imperial Fleet was putting in work, and you get this."

Gasps rippled through the audience. The paths of the pirates shied away from any area with imperial activity, making it clear just how much the pirates knew about the military's movements.

"I don't know about other mercenaries, but I use data like this to find places where pirates are working and hunt them down," I explained. "This would be more accurate if we had data from private miners in the most resource-rich locations, but…well, this is good enough. Do you all follow me so far?"

"Yes, how interesting," Serena said. "This lecture is being recorded, so you're free to continue."

"Understood. So the obvious next question is: How can your squad use this information to hunt pirates? Well, what I'm about to tell you may come as a shock." I glanced at Lieutenant Commander Serena. She nodded ever so slightly. "I'll give it to you straight. Any ship bigger than or as big as a cruiser isn't suited to hunt pirates. If you really want to crush them, you'll have to change your squad composition entirely."

Another burst of chatter and audible breaths. I couldn't blame them. This squad was built around two corvettes, three destroyers, five cruisers, and one battleship. They were giants.

"Pirates often work in asteroid belts," I went on. "If you use that data distribution map to find them, you'll almost always be fighting in belts. Do you think cruisers and battleships can fight well in that kind of environment?"

This time, they went silent. *It ain't gonna work, see?*

“Based on my simulator work, I was barely able to manage destroyers, but I’d recommend corvettes. It’s not my place to make decisions regarding your composition, but I think you’ll want to look into that.”

“We appreciate your concern,” Serena said. “However, could we not use the ships’ firepower to just remove the asteroids from the equation?”

I’d come prepared for that very objection. “Yeah. You can kill the space pirates just fine with that, but you’ll get a whole heap of complaints from private miners. Those resource-rich asteroids are how they make a living. They might be happy to be rid of pirates, but they’ll be much less happy if you kill their business in the process.”

“Hmm.”

“I said you should change your squad composition, but I doubt it’s that easy for you to do. Mercenaries can change ships and weapons whenever we want, but it’s probably not as simple for the military. I’m sure you’re all a bit offended by my suggestion.”

I got a couple nods at that one. Pilots tended to get attached to their ships and treat them like family, like partners. A ship couldn’t be abandoned that easily.

“That’s why I have a proposal,” I said. “Lieutenant Commander, do you have the resolve to do whatever it takes to hunt pirate scum and protect your empire?”

“Y-yes? Anything within my power, I suppose.”

“That’s just what I wanted to hear.”

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Within a few days, the Pirate Hunting Unit performed its first real mission in the Arein System.

“Their total record so far is thirty-two ships,” Serena said.

“Ha ha ha! What a bountiful harvest,” I said.

“Yes, quite…”

Standing on the bridge of their flagship—the battleship Lestarius—I was feeling quite peachy. Serena looked awfully uncertain next to me as we watched her crew clean up the last of the pirates, but they were executing their mission beautifully.

"Heh, military ships are a cut above, aren't they? Loving that range and firepower."

"Erm, isn't this rather dishonorable?" she asked me.

"Who cares? You're happy to see dead pirates, the pilots are happy to serve their cause, I'm happy to get my bonus, and the Empire's people are happy to be without pirates. That's like a quadruple win there."

"True, but…"

Serena and I watched as a medium-sized transport ship lumbered into view. It carried Rare Metal, as well as high-tech medicine produced right here in the system. However, it was having some trouble, limping along as it sent out a weak distress signal—extremely weak, in fact. *I mean, the place is crawling with pirates. Maybe they're lowering their output to keep themselves from being picked up on radars?*

"The plan is going well," I said. That transport ship was pure pirate bait. Serena had purchased it. 5,000,000 Ener right out of pocket, like it was nothing.

"I'm not too sure about this underhanded attack," Serena said uneasily.

"Look. They're a bunch of a-holes who attack helpless merchants, miners, and travelers. They can hardly complain if we employ a little trickery. Besides, they're not some foreign army; they're *pirates*. You're not gonna receive a formal complaint or whatever."

The strategy I devised was simple. A force built around cruisers couldn't go chasing after the pirates; we'd have to lure the buggers out. We gave them that sitting duck full of Rare Metal and sat back to wait.

First, the corvettes and destroyers would go into the cluster and clean things up a bit. That meant either attacking the pirates or—if there weren't any pirates—guiding the larger ships into the cluster. Cruisers and battleships were huge, but if they reduced their generator output, it would

be easy for them to sneak in. Asteroids came in plenty of different sizes, and some of them were big enough to hide battleships.

After that, the bait would be placed just outside of the cluster and begin emitting a weak emergency signal. Drawn to it, the pirates would then be eradicated by super-powered cruiser and battleship fire.

Huge military-grade ships like cruisers and battleships had capacitors that could maintain battle-readiness and basic functionality even when their generators didn't work. That electricity was enough to let them blow away pirate ships without being detected. Once the capacitors ran out of juice, we would stop the distress signal, activate the generator, and restore electricity to them. After they were charged, the bait ship would go back to singing its siren song.

Once we took out one group of pirates, we could simply rinse and repeat. Of course, that would only last so long. If we tried this trick over and over in the same spot, even lowly pirates would catch on eventually.

Still, it should be good enough to take out a bunch of pirates and get me my 20 percent of the loot and rewards. We'd already taken down thirty-two pirates. Pure profit. How could I not smile?

Oh, and if the pirates did somehow manage to get into the bait ship, they were in for a different nasty surprise. They'd be greeted by Serena's subordinates, all of them big, burly, and ready to brawl. What, you think those rascals would shoot the ship down? Absolutely not. If they did, they would damage the cargo. Stealing it for their own fleet made much more sense.

My little plan worked like a charm. The fleet crushed fifty-two ships that day, a tidy 100,000 Ener profit for me.

"Hoo boy. Big money!" I said.

"Good for you." Serena shot me a dour glare. She hadn't come out quite so clean. That ship she bought cost her a pretty penny, and the military refused to treat it as an official expense.

I winked at her. "Keep this up and I bet you can write off that expense."

“It would certainly be a welcome miracle.” She heaved a sigh. Marquess’s daughter or not, that 5,000,000 was nothing to sneeze at. Maybe her financial situation wasn’t as cushy as it seemed.

“Keep on using this method for everyday pirate hunting, and once you find the location of their base, you can just attack it head-on,” I said. “Ultimately, it’s a battle of wits against those space pirates.”

“I see,” she said. “Though we do have more than half of the contract period remaining. I expect you to stay with us, understood?”

“Aye-aye, Lieutenant Commander.”

It would have been nice to dump this strategy on them and leave, but of course, things couldn’t be that easy. I gave Serena a salute and braced for whatever she had in store for me next.

Chapter 7:
Lieutenants Have Layers

THE IMPERIAL FLEET always performed maintenance on its ships after a battle whenever possible. Those ships were built with taxpayer money and lent to them by the emperor, after all, so they couldn't be careless.

Despite the one-sided massacre, the Pirate Hunting Unit got stuck in maintenance for a while. Normally, soldiers would use mandatory maintenance as time off, but we had to concoct new strategies and review yesterday's battle. It'd be just another normal day for me anyhow.

Or. So. I. Thought.

"Shall we be off, then?" Serena said, grinning. I'd arrived on the bridge of the Lestarius flagship for my usual teaching routine, only to find Serena alone and wearing casual clothing. A beige knitted sweater hugged her curves, and her black skirt showed off her legs. It might have been alluring, but she also wore a sword belt complete with some high-tech weapon. *What is this, fantasy casual?*

"Wait, what are you plotting?" I said. I wasn't stupid enough to be all *Okay! Woo, date with a pretty lady!* Nothing about our interactions so far led me to trust Serena's intentions in the slightest.

"Plotting? Why, it's nothing that bad." Serena punctuated her lie with a haughty laugh. I went right for my handheld terminal. "What are you doing?" she said.

I dodged the question. "Uh, nothing. So where are we going?" She probably didn't care all that much about my momentary tapping.

"I'm off work today," she said.

"Uh-huh." Yeah, the getup kind of gave that away, though I wouldn't have minded working for a boss who dressed like that every day.

"I was thinking of going out to eat in the city," she continued.

"Sounds like fun."

“Isn’t it just sad to visit a restaurant alone, though?”

Ha ha ha! Poor, lonely lady.

“Why don’t you invite a friend?” I asked.

“Unfortunately, I have no friends in this star system.” She cradled her cheek in her hand as if disheartened. *How deliberate.*

“That so? Why don’t you invite one of your subordinates?”

“I assume they would be rather uncomfortable seeing their superior this way.”

“If I’m being treated as a lieutenant, doesn’t that make you my superior as well?”

“Yes, but when the contract is over, that relationship will cease to be. It shouldn’t concern you as much as my other subordinates. Besides, you seem to be very outgoing, even when speaking to nobility.” Serena closed in, still smiling.

I scooted away, desperate to buy time. “Looks like I don’t have any work today, so I guess we could say I’m off too, right?”

“Oh, no,” she said. “I am off work, but you are not. I would like you to discuss pirate-killing strategies and your experiences over lunch. It’s *work-related*.”

“Work-related? This sounds like abuse of power.”

“Hee hee! Worry not. Nobody will reprimand me for abuse of power for something as small as this. You’ve been hired as a pirate hunting expert, so you should make sure to fulfill your duty.” She grinned like a cat closing in on her prey.

This kitty definitely intended to sink her claws into me. While I scrambled for an escape, my terminal started ringing. I pulled it out of my pocket and glanced at Serena for permission. She gave a reluctant nod.

“Hiro here!” I could scream for joy. My SOS to Elma had actually gotten through.

“How’s it going?” Elma said.

“Off work. Potential lunch.”

“You can’t refuse, huh? Accept, but on the condition that we can come with you.”

“Gotcha.” I hung up. Serena’s gaze had narrowed to a glare. “If my crew can come, then sure.”

“Rather strange to bring other girls on a date, don’t you think?”

“If this is *work-related*, then it’s not a date. Besides, Elma’s a veteran. She has way more experience than me. She’d be the perfect person to talk to if you want some *real* mercenary stories.” Checkmate.

“Urk… Very well.” Serena continued to glower at me, but she couldn’t refuse.

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“Good morning, Lieutenant Commander.” Elma greeted Serena, exchanging smiles with her. “Your outfit there makes you seem quite approachable.”

“Thank you, Elma. Your apparel is lovely too. And Mimi, you are as adorable as ever.”

“Umm, th-thank you,” Mimi stammered. “Y-you’re very pretty, Lieutenant Commander Serena.” She was looking a little pale.

Elma looked like a traditional, full-on fantasy elf for once, with her green, flowy clothing. I wished I’d gotten to see her like this sooner.

Why don’t you always wear that? You’re always in mercenary gear no matter where we go. If you’re lazy, maybe *a shirt and pants. That’s it. Wear some elf stuff, girl!*

Meanwhile, Mimi had gone back to her getup from our shopping trip. It made her look like a nice little rich girl, refined and classical. Her bust was beautifully accentuated, of course. Meanwhile, I stuck to my usual pants and jacket. My philosophy when it came to clothing was that anything normal was fine by me.

“It’s usually my job to escort the girls around, but unfortunately, I don’t know much about the colony,” I said. “Oh, and also… Since we’re not

at work, I'm not gonna kiss up much. Cool?"

"No problem," Serena replied.

"Thanks. Things get too stiff when I have to be all polite and formal. So, Serena, did you want to go somewhere specific?"

"Yes. I've selected a restaurant with good reviews. It also offers organic food. I've arranged for transportation, so let us go to the fourth elevator and head into the city from there."

"Aye-aye." Organic, eh? So instead of food cartridges, we'd get real meat and veggies? Now she had me interested.

Mimi bounced along beside me, hardly able to contain her excitement. A restaurant like this would go a long way toward her goal of trying all the food in the galaxy.

"Never came here before," I said when we piled into the elevator.

"Oh, yeah," Mimi said. "When we went shopping, we used the second elevator."

"The second elevator's vicinity is a popular downtown shopping area," Serena said. "This area is more for government offices and major corporations, so it is geared toward nobility and the wealthy, with high-quality restaurants and popular brands."

We gradually descended to the city below. Once we stepped out, Elma commented, "Wow. Even the people walking around look rich."

"Plenty of guards too," I said.

Elma, Mimi, and Serena might have been able to blend in one way or another, but the guards eyed me in my boring merc gear. I probably looked like the girls' bodyguard or something. I could tell they were just dying to frisk me.

Thankfully, Serena had ordered a taxi, so I didn't have to endure the stares from the guards for long. We cruised smoothly to our destination, watching the ritzy, upper-class accommodations out the windows.

The taxi dropped us off in front of a tall building that looked nothing like a restaurant to me.

"Our destination is on the third floor," Serena informed me.

“Looks like a normal building to me.”

“Living space is valuable, so they focus all the gaudiness on the inside,” Elma said.

“I-I’m rather nervous…” Mimi murmured.

Serena giggled. “Tee hee. It’s only a restaurant. There’s no need to worry. I’ve reserved a private room, so you won’t have to fuss over manners.”

“A private room, huh?” If Mimi and Elma hadn’t come to my rescue, I would’ve been alone in a room with Serena. She really was willing to use any means necessary to get me wrapped around her finger.

“We’re right on time. Shall we?” Serena prompted, guiding us inside.

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“You know,” Serena ranted, “they all look down on me because I’m a woman. But we work our butts off, I’ll have you know.”

“Oh, um, yeah. Sure,” I said politely.

Just a half hour into our meal, Mimi, Elma, and I had all arrived at the same conclusion: *This lady’s nothing but work!*

Things had started out fine. Fine wine accompanied a meal of real-deal meat and veggies. As a general non-drinker, I stuck to water, but Serena indulged until her eyes glazed over. Every sip made her less and less articulate. When we suggested she might have had enough, she just said, “It’s my day off, and I’ll drink all I want!” Honestly, we might have just egged her on.

“Bowing my head when I don’t wanna, forcing smiles…and what do I get for it?! They just look at my damn tits! I oughta cut them up!” Serena said.

See?! Like that!

She’d told us outside we didn’t need to worry about manners, but maybe this private room was really so Serena herself could cut loose.

“Oh, uhh… Calm down, okay? Put the sword down.”

Serena drew her sword and jabbed it in the air. I rushed to her side, easing the weapon from her hands and setting it aside for now. I really did not want this lush getting violent.

“And *you*!” Serena seethed, glaring at me. “How can you resist me when I’m trying so hard to tempt you?!”

“Do you wanna know?”

“No, I don’t.” She clamped her hands over her ears. “I already know. Trying to scout you by force is wrong…”

“So you were self-aware all along.” Elma chuckled as Serena laid her head down on the table.

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“Uhh, so you said I’d start off as a warrant officer if I joined the fleet, right?”

“Yes. Wanna join?”

“What’s the pay?”

“About 4,000 a month…”

“I can make 100,000 a *day* if I try. Do you see? There’s no reason for me to join,” I told her.

“Ulp…”

Crying won’t help, girl.

It wasn’t that there was *nothing* in it for me to join the fleet. I could try to rise through the ranks and become a knight, then use that status to get my dream house. But that would take forever. I’d toil away for ten years or more. They might even take the Krishna away from me.

“Anyway,” I continued, “I’d really appreciate it if you’d give up on trying to recruit me. Look, we’re getting to know each other, and we’ve eaten lunch together now. As long as you keep the rewards coming, I’m glad to keep taking on contract work once in a while.”

“You won’t abandon me?” Serena asked.

“Please don’t cry. You’re killing me right now. This isn’t even an appropriate conversation for our relationship.” I tried to put her off with a glare, but she just pouted. *What a handful this woman is.*

“If you fell for that, I would’ve clocked you so hard,” Elma grumbled.

“How little do you think of me? Seriously.”

“M-Master Hiro just has a kind soul.” Mimi set a hand on my arm. *Tch. I’ll ignore Elma’s quip for now out of respect for Mimi, but I’ll get her back.*

“It’s not fair,” Serena whimpered as she leaned against the table. *What’s not fair?* “It’s not fair! I saw Hiro first! Not fair!” She then stomped her feet and started crying all over again.

“Eugh…” This was getting cringeworthy.

“Excuse me?” Elma shot me a look.

And so did Mimi. “What’s she talking about?”

I sighed. “When I first docked at Tarmein Prime, this Port Authority guy was harassing me. Serena saved me from his clutches.”

“That’s right. I saved you!” Serena hollered. “That means I met Hiro first, but the moment I take my eyes off of him, some other girls snatch him away from me!”

I was utterly perplexed. “No one took me away from you.”

“It shouldn’t matter to you who Hiro decides to be with,” Elma said.

“Agh… You’re right, but…but!” Serena knocked back the rest of her drink and apparently swallowed the rest of her sentence in the process. *Lady, you’re already black-out drunk. Please don’t drink any more*! “Uuuurgh…” Half-sobbing, she passed out asleep right there on the table.

“What do we do now?” I asked the girls. “She’s out.”

“Should we eat a ton since she’s paying?” Elma smirked.

“As if. She’s the daughter of a marquess, Elma.”

“If her parents knew, we could be in trouble…” Mimi said.

A call on the tablet we’d used for ordering interrupted our conversation.

“Yes?” I said.

“Your reservation will be ending soon. Would you like to extend it?”

“Umm…” Serena was down for the count. I glanced at Elma, who shook her head.

“These rooms are expensive. They’ll overcharge like heck if you extend it.”

While Elma and I put our heads together, Mimi tended to Serena, who didn’t seem able to walk without help. *Looks like I’ll be carrying her.*

“No extension, thank you,” I said. “Can we pay now?”

“Very well. We await you in the lobby.”

***

After forking over the exorbitant cost of the meal, we carted Serena back to the Krishna. She was definitely in no state to return to the fleet.

"Good grief," I said.

I left Serena in our medical pod with Mimi and Elma. She needed to be stripped down for the pod, and after that display back in the restaurant, I certainly wasn't going to be the one to do it. Besides, a woman like her shouldn't be seen in her underwear by any man other than her husband.

Instead, I retreated to the cafeteria to treat myself to an uncarbonated soda. *Ahh. I feel the liquid joy flowing through me.*

What now, though? Surely I couldn't take Serena's drunken ramblings seriously. They were just the crazy rantings of a drunk, nothing more. Were those tears even real? She couldn't seriously be that upset about me being with other women. Nah, not worth my time to worry about it. Maybe it was my sugary, refreshing soda, but resolving to set the whole Serena thing aside lifted a weight off my shoulders. I resolved to move ahead as though nothing had happened. It wasn't worth bugging her about the meal or what she'd said. I could earn it back through my contract with her anyway.

That was fine for me, but as for Serena… Recruiting me was going to get a lot more embarrassing and difficult after all that.

I shook my head. *For real, though. Who gets that drunk at a lunch meeting that they planned? She was like some first-time drinker who didn't realize how hard the booze would hit until she already had too much. Maybe that's just how she is outside of work, though.*

While I was pondering, Mimi poked her head into the cafeteria. "Serena woke up."

"Seriously? That was fast."

"The medical pod sobered her up, apparently."

"That tech is insane." Was that the power of futuristic medical technology? Could people here drink all they wanted as long as they had a

pod? *Come to think of it, Elma does use that pod pretty often. No way… Could it be?*

"Should I go in there?"

"Elma is talking with her right now. I think we should wait here."

"Cool. Want a drink?"

"I'm fine." Mimi took the chair next to me.

There wasn't much more I could do about the Serena thing, so I moved on to happier subjects: "That organic stuff was good."

"Yes, it was!" Mimi chirped. "That was my first time eating fresh vegetables and fruit. Have you eaten it much?"

"Yeah, in my old universe. We didn't have food cartridges or automatic cookers, so those are really new to me." I glanced at the Steel Chef 5 enshrined in a corner of the cafeteria. It was kind of incredible how it could make so many flavors from such tiny, strange ingredients. "I don't know if the organic food in this universe is the same, though."

"You're from the third planet of the Solar System, yes? What about the food here is different?" Mimi asked, cocking her head.

Mimi knew little beyond the fact that I was from Earth and that I had been blown here during a hyperdrive accident. I'd left out some of the weirder details of my ending up here.

"Oh, yeah," I said. "Back where I'm from, when they say 'organic' food, they mean that you don't use pesticides or chemical fertilizers on the crops while you grow it. I don't know if that restaurant does the same thing or not."

"Wow. Isn't that an inefficient process?"

"Yeah, but they say it's tastier and better for you. Not that I would know if they were right or not. They were all luxury foods, so I hadn't eaten much of it." Back home, I'd loved my junk food and soda too much to bother with the fancy organic stuff. "What did you like from the meal, Mimi?"

"I liked the seafood salad. The crunchy veggies, the tender shrimp and squid, and the dressing on top!" She clapped her hands together, eyes

sparkling. Mimi always looked most excited when she talked about food.

“Hey, even I can make seafood salad as long as we’ve got the right ingredients.” The recipe was simple enough, but getting veggies, mixed seafood, vinegar, oil, and all the other condiments would be tricky.

“Really?!” Mimi leaned in. *Hey, now. Calm down.*

“Again, as long as I have the ingredients. I used to live alone, so I learned to cook a little. But in this universe, ingredients are hard to get. And we don’t even have a kitchen. Come to think of it, wasn’t there an all-in-one cooking set back at the gadget shop?” I’d ignored it at the time, but maybe I should’ve bought it.

“Let’s go get one some time! I’ll look up places that sell them!” Mimi grabbed my hands, squeezing tight.

“S-sure.”

We’d had salads before, but this seafood salad was really hyping Mimi up. *I hope my cooking doesn’t let her down after all this build-up.*

We were still working out the details of our seafood salad adventure when Elma entered the cafeteria with a perfectly sober Serena in tow. The lieutenant commander was neat and tidy once more, all the ruddiness washed out of her complexion.

“Sorry for the wait,” Elma said. “The princess has awoken.”

“Guess she didn’t need a prince’s kiss, after all,” I joked.

“Oh? Are you disappointed?” Elma asked me.

“I’m not much of a prince, really.” I shrugged, but that joke had Serena covering her face, red all the way to the tips of her ears. She wouldn’t live this down any time soon. “Must suck to be a boss. But hey, it probably felt good to blow off some steam, yeah?”

“I am deeply sorry for what happened,” Serena said.

“Don’t worry about it,” I said. “The food was good, and we’d never have gone there without you inviting us. If you’re that sorry, maybe you could show us around more.”

Hopefully, playing tour guide would make Serena feel like we’d evened the score. The thought of her feeling indebted to me chilled me to

my core.

"V-very well. I'll be sure to send you a referral."

"Big thanks. Want us to escort you to your ship?" I said.

"O-oh, no, thank you. Um…"

"I know you've got a lot on your plate. For all intents and purposes, though, I heard nothing. We had some good food, we drank together, and we had a good time. Cool?"

"Thank you for your consideration." Serena bid us farewell with curt little nods and hurried off the Krishna, still red as a beet.

"It must be hard to be a woman in the military," Mimi murmured.

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Other pirate hunting excursions…did not go as smoothly as the first.

"They're not biting, are they?" Serena said.

"Figures."

For a whole week, pirates failed to take the bait. They must have figured out the trick and told one another about it. It only took a couple obliterated pirate groups for the rest to get the message.

"What now?" I asked. "Do we try the thing?"

"The thing" was a half-measure that involved changing the ship IDs and names of Serena's crew. Once we took care of that, we could repaint the bait ship, and then our little trap would work again. Serena had the authority and skill to manage the logistics of the plan.

In fact, her adept handling of matters like that had already gotten recognized by the higher-ups in the Imperial Fleet. That bait ship even got written off as a work expense, and she was given leeway to buy new bait ships on the fleet's dime.

"That would work, but perhaps we should cut them off at the source?" Serena said.

“Fair,” I said. “Considering how many we’ve killed off so far, they might be running out of guys.”

We’d taken out more than 200 pirates with our bait-and-switch tactic. In a game world, they might have just kept coming, but here in reality, they weren’t so keen on continuing to take such huge losses.

Still, despite their limited manpower here, space pirates might’ve actually been endless after all—across the galaxy as a whole, that is. Even a harsh culling would only really push them to retreat to a base and regroup. If you took down a base, they could still scatter and reform later, even if they had some trouble refueling and doing maintenance for a short time.

“Let’s crush them,” Serena declared. We’d gleaned the location of a nearby pirate base from the ships we’d destroyed here. Seemed Serena was ready to pounce.

“How should we prepare?” I asked. “Do we set up another cage?”

“Surround and destroy,” she said. “That’s the key to victory. Let’s petition the mercenary guild for aid as well.”

I was glad she was willing to ask for help. Choosing the safer option might mean less glory for her, but it also meant a more secure victory with fewer losses. It took a good leader to make that kind of choice.

“What should I do, then?”

“I’ll have you help, of course. Though you will be working under the same conditions as other mercenaries.”

“Depends on the conditions.” I wasn’t going to accept that easily. I had to stand my ground and let her know I could still refuse a raw deal. If I did mercenary work outside of this contract, I’d want different rewards and compensation as well.

“You’re a careful one.” Serena grinned wryly. “If we wanted to take them out right now, what sort of forces would we need?”

“To exterminate them? Well, you would need to add at least thirty corvettes to our current force as a front line. Fifty if you want to be certain, though.”

Destroying a pirate base was simple enough. They were hardly even bases, more like minor supply stations and outposts. Serena’s current squad

certainly had the firepower to get the job done. We wouldn't even have to get all that close, thanks to our superior range.

But *extermination* was different. The moment they were attacked, the pirates would load up their loot and flee in all directions. To prevent that, you needed to infiltrate with a hefty front line—thirty to fifty ships would do. Serena's squad simply didn't have enough ships for that. Hence the need for those corvettes to serve as a front line. Fast and decently strong, corvettes were great for scouting and adaptability. No other ship was as good at getting up close and personal.

It was the classic military split: those who loved the big guns like battleships and cruisers, and those who savored the mobility, responsiveness, and battlefield control of corvettes and destroyers.

"It will be extremely difficult to procure that many corvettes for my squad," Serena noted.

"Sure. We can just subcontract the extras like before, though. That's what the merc guild is for, after all."

"Indeed." Serena rubbed her chin in thought, likely calculating exactly how many more troops she could add to the Pirate Hunting Unit. "We have the data. I'll make an official request to army headquarters."

Chapter 8:
The Second Great Pirate Cleanup

TWO DAYS AFTER Serena submitted her request, the battle arrived. We were on our own this time—no Imperial Fleet was going to back us up. That was just fine by us. Serena got her Pirate Hunting Unit prepped, pretended to head to a different system, and then hid in the Arein System in preparation for an ambush.

We'd covered our tracks well. The briefing went out on a prerecorded holo-message in case our comms got tapped. The whole unit synchronized, so we could exit FTL travel all at once and launch right into the attack.

"Hiro, it's almost time," Elma informed me.

"Yep. Mimi, are you ready?"

"I'm ready anytime!" Mimi said.

We were in the Krishna's cockpit, waiting for the battle to begin. I switched the generator output from standby to travel as we cruised among our fellow mercenaries. Like them, we would be using FTL drive to head to the scene of the battle.

"This'll be our first real battle in a while," Elma said. "Are your skills still sharp?"

"Probably," I said. "How are things looking over there?"

"Look, buddy. Controlling generators and subsystems is my forte. Who do you think I am?" Elma grinned at me, cocky as ever.

As for me, I might have a little rust to kick off at the start of the battle, but I'd been keeping up my training in those simulators, so I should still be sharp.

"Charging now," Elma said. "Five, four, three, two, one… Faster-than-light drive now charged."

A boom cracked through space, and the Krishna jolted into FTL travel. The sound always got me. How did it even occur when space was a

vacuum? My research had turned up little but vague references to interference with the shields and materials of the ship.

Ah, whatever. Forget all that. I could use my phone, computer, electric range, and TV without knowing how they worked. Thus, I could move a ship without knowing how it worked too!

"Wonder how much we'll make this time," Elma said.

"Let's see," I said. "The fixed pay is 50,000 at the end of the battle, while our piecemeal pay is 5,000 per small craft, 20,000 per medium, and 100,000 per large."

"That's the same as before, isn't it?" Mimi asked.

"Yeah," Elma said. "That's fair market price, plus we get to keep the bounties and cargo from the ships we take down. Skilled pilots get more money, so mercs are always eager to help out, especially since those pirates flee their little nest with ships full of cargo."

Pirates knew to get out while the getting was good, but they hoarded whatever they could as they escaped. Maybe they'd be better off traveling light for maneuverability, but that meant abandoning all their treasures as well as their base—a lose-lose either way. It made sense to try to cling to their valuables while escaping, so they could eventually sell off the loot and attempt to regroup.

"It's about time to go wild. Think Serena will be okay?" I asked.

"Probably," Elma said. "She's a good soldier, if nothing else."

"Ah ha ha…" Mimi laughed wryly at Elma's careful wording. The scene from a few days ago was still fresh in our minds.

"We're almost at our destination," Elma said. "Exiting FTL in five, four, three, two, one…"

Another boom snapped through the quiet of space as blurry streaks of stars settled into pinpoints. It took mere heartbeats for the Pirate Hunting Unit to launch their attack after exiting FTL. The battleship and cruisers tore through the base and any structures around it with a blitz of large-bore lasers, plasma cannons, and railguns.

"They're flashy, aren't they?" I mused.

“I don’t see many ships coming out,” Elma said. “The ambush definitely worked.”

“Do you think we’ll get any prey?” As much as I wanted to succeed, having all the pirates go down inside the base meant no money.

We shifted the generator to battle-ready mode and accelerated toward the pirates’ base. Other mercenaries rushed in alongside us.

“There are signals on the radar now,” Mimi reported. “The pirate ships are launching!”

“Fantastic. Looks like pirates are back on the menu, girls.”

“Putting weapon systems online now,” Elma said.

The Krishna shifted around us, deploying four weapons arms, each bearing a heavy laser cannon. Two flak cannons emerged from either side of the cockpit as well.

“Here we go, ladies!” I roared, launching the Krishna into battle.

***

“Three enemy ships at ten o’clock, at our elevation!” Mimi announced.

I locked on to the enemy ships, checking their angle and speed. They were heading this way.

“We’ll pass by them, swing around, and shoot them from behind,” I said.

I pointed the Krishna right at the enemy ships and accelerated, brushing past. A burst of lasers and multi-cannon fire pattered against the hull but did little actual damage to us.

“Brace for G-forces!” I said.

I kicked on the thrusters and banked into a 180-degree turn. It swung us around behind the enemy, but the G-forces shook the whole ship. I gritted my teeth, fighting to maintain control.

“Enemy ships ahead!” Mimi warned me.

“Let’s mow ’em down,” I said.

With us sneaking behind them, two tried to escape to the sides, but I showered them in heavy laser fire. A final ship whizzed away in a straight line. He must have been desperate, but that wasn’t enough to save him.

“That makes three.”

Fire erupted from the cannons by the cockpit as countless bits of shrapnel rained down on the pirate ship from behind. The ammunition cut through their shields like a hot knife through butter and ate through the ship’s thrusters, then its energy pipes, and finally its main generator. Instant Swiss cheese. I zipped past the three exploding ships and searched for my next mark.

Elma smiled at me. “You don’t seem rusty at all.”

“You think?”

“Three o’clock, twenty degrees upward,” Mimi said. “Six… No, seven enemy ships. Two of them are medium craft.”

“Are you gonna charge in?” Elma asked.

“You know it,” I said. “I’ll let you decide when to use the chaffs and flares.”

“Understood,” Elma replied.

I activated the thrusters and aimed for this new cluster of prey. The pirates noticed and hopped on their comms.

“Enemy approaching… Uh, the hell? Their ship’s got arms,” one pirate said.

“Arms? Let me see that. Gah, it’s that monster from before! He’s bad news! Run, run, run!”

“Run where?! There’s nowhere to run!”

“Just kill him before he can kill us!”

Six ships turned and barreled toward me at once. Two looked like transport ships repurposed for missile support.

“Let’s start with the medium craft,” I told Mimi and Elma.

“Yes, sir!”

“Gotcha, boss.”

“Fire, fire, fire!” one enemy screamed. “Give ’em all ya got!”

A warning siren blared in the cockpit: heat-seeking missiles, the pirates’ most dangerous weapon. They could follow us no matter how we dipped and dodged.

“Releasing flares!” Elma shouted. She launched the flares, hoping to confuse the missiles into seeking out these new heat sources instead of us. In the meantime, the Krishna wove through the darting missiles.

“Do it again!” a pirate roared.

“Activate point-blank defenses!”

“Stop them!”

“It’s too late, my guys,” I said with a low chuckle.

The medium craft attempted to release more missiles, but it was too late. I unleashed my flak cannons on them, slashing through their shields and plating to strike the missiles still aboard their ships.

“Waaaaargh?!”

One of the medium ships exploded in a bloom of fire. The other pirates wavered.

“O-oh, shit.”

“We gotta split!”

Elma’s gaze flicked to me. “You’re not just gonna let them go, right?”

“Absolutely not. We kill all pirate scum.”

I doused them in heavy laser fire, circled back around, and blanketed the rest in flak. *Do I enjoy slaughtering people with no will to fight? Yes, I do! I get money, and I get to clean up some space trash. What could be more fun? Ahh, the sweet taste of justice.*

“Heeelp!” one pirate screamed.

“No,” I said. Perhaps this was overly harsh and cruel, but letting these vermin live would only cause more suffering for someone else down the line.

“Area cleared,” Mimi said. “The next-nearest ones are at ten o’clock.”

“Let’s go.”

“Right!”

We turned the Krishna toward its next battlefield.

***

“How’s the battle going?” I asked.

“The ambush seems to have worked. There is no substantial counterattack.”

“Good. Let each captain know to continue their work calmly.”

“Yes, Lieutenant Commander!”

We overwhelmed the pirates instantly by destroying their base’s hangar in our first strike. However, that was only their largest. A few pirates still managed to launch from the other ones.

Not that it mattered. Our mercenaries were waiting and eager. They were mopping up any pirates attempting to flee the sector.

Our little experiment here could not be going much better. Usually, only one branch of the military would patrol each star system. In fact, conventional wisdom dictated that the military did not hunt pirates directly. A force like this—one designed specifically for pirate hunting—was a first in the Empire’s long history. And since we weren’t communicating with other branches of the military, we kept our plans a secret and caught the pirates completely unaware.

“Let’s see how the rewards are looking.”

I tapped the holo-display to check on the scores of the mercenaries. In first place was the Krishna, *his* ship. A grin pulled at my lips, but I covered my mouth to contain it. I couldn’t go gloating over a single pilot.

Besides, this battle wasn’t over yet. We still had to expect the unexpected.

***

"That about does it, huh?" I asked Mimi.

"Area cleared," she confirmed. "I don't see any other pirates nearby."

The battle raged on in other sectors, but our radar was clear. The only blips appeared far away from our location.

"How many did we kill?"

"Our score is thirty-three small craft and three medium craft," Elma said.

"So we didn't get as much as in Tarmein, huh?" *Pretty sure we did way better there. Am I rusty after all?*

"If there aren't that many ships, then there's nothing we can do," Elma said. "I'd say you did great." The sector was certainly clear of pirate activity. Maybe that ambush worked a little too well.

"Fair enough," I said. "So 5,000 per small one and 20,000 per medium. That puts us at 205,000 Ener, right?"

"Add 50,000 for our participation reward," Elma said. "Then bounties should be counted separately."

"I think small craft are usually around 10,000, while mediums are around 50,000. Add in the participation reward and that should be 500,000 on top of our base reward, right?"

"Just about. Sounds like our total is 700,000 or so, huh? Along with whatever we harvest from their cargo."

"We'd better put our backs into that cargo-collecting," I said.

We got straight to work on that, rummaging through the destroyed ships in search of Rare Metal and high-tech goods. Alcohol, drugs, and other luxury items would also be a good score. The drugs were illegal, of course, but acquiring them this way and selling them off after the battle was no crime.

I never did quite understand why the fleet paid such a high price for drugs in particular. Maybe they just didn't want them floating around as space debris? If we didn't recover them now, then containers of the stuff would drift around the system. That could make it easy for scavengers to scoop them up instead. They always swept in after a battle like vultures picking at a carcass. Some mercs really hated the scavengers, and I didn't particularly care for them either, but there were worse things out there in the universe.

"I'll keep watch. Elma, could you teach Mimi how to work the recovery drones?"

"Aye-aye, Captain. Mimi, let's do this."

"O-okay."

Elma used all sorts of sensors to start searching through our prey. Meanwhile, I steered the ship to where we needed to go.

Chapter 9:
A Colony Under Attack

"PHEW. What a haul!" I grinned at our loot. We'd come away with Rare Metal and tons of expensive, high-tech bits of equipment. Definitely a tidy profit to be made here.

"At least we didn't get anything dangerous this time, right?" Elma asked me.

"Oh! Uh-huh, sure."

"Excuse me?" Elma narrowed her eyes and set her hands on her hips.

"W-we really didn't get anything bad, right?" Mimi said.

I shrugged at Elma's glare and Mimi's trepidation. Seriously, our loot was pretty ordinary. We weren't going to walk away with something as crazy as a Singing Crystal every time. *Our luck wasn't that hot today. Sad!*

Serena called back everyone still out in the field, leaving behind a few cruisers and destroyers to mop up the remnants of the pirates. The stragglers couldn't do much against military-grade power suits and heavy weapons.

As for me? I didn't do face-to-face combat. Sure, my laser gun was special, but it wouldn't break through the enemy's power armor. I had power armor of my own on board, but I wouldn't last a single grazing shot. Come to think of it, I'd never even used it before. Honestly, that gear in the hold did little more than gather dust.

"Wanna get going?"

"H-hold on!" Elma shouted. "We *don't* have anything dangerous, right?!"

"W-we're fine…I hope!" Mimi peeped.

I brushed off their panic and turned the ship back toward Arein Tertius. With our cargo hold full to the brim, we couldn't claim any more loot anyway. The scavengers already blipping on the radar would have a field day, though.

“Charge FTL drive,” I ordered. “Let’s go.”

“Come on, seriously. Are we actually safe?” Elma pressed.

“Dude, we’re fine. There’s nothing crazy on board. Nothing dangerous, all normal. Maybe.”

“What do you mean, ‘maybe’?!” Elma screeched as I activated the faster-than-light drive. With a thunderous boom, the Krishna charged into FTL travel.

“How badly did that Singing Crystal traumatize you?” I asked Elma.

“Anyone would be traumatized by you whipping that thing out like it’s nothing!”

“That bad?”

“Ugh. That thing’s worse than a reactive warhead. If we dropped it and it broke, we’d be dead.”

That seemed like a pretty harsh comparison to me. Reactive warheads were stronger than any atomic or hydrogen bomb. They could obliterate an entire ship; that was what we used for our reactive anti-ship torpedo on the Krishna. A Singing Crystal couldn’t be that much worse, though the crystal life-forms they spawned could work longer and in a wider range.

I smiled. “Neat!”

“*Neat*? You’re awfully carefree.” Elma huffed in exasperation.

“That’s our Master Hiro.” Mimi beamed proudly, though I wasn’t sure why.

“Guess you’re back to babysitting that rich lady when we return to the colony.” Elma let out a sigh. She’d finally relaxed; perhaps it was because we’d entered FTL travel and were safely headed away from the battlefield.

“It won’t take long,” I assured her. “It’s just another week. What should we do after?”

“If you want to keep making money, how about we find a sector at war? With your skill and the Krishna, we can make a ton of cash.”

“Hmm. I dunno, I’m not that interested. It sounds uncomfortable.”

In *Stella Online*, colonies at war were pretty restrictive. Stores would be closed. All you could really do was refuel and perform maintenance. If it was the same here, we'd face tight security. Sometimes the army even took up a patrol to watch for terrorism in such places.

"Hmm. Three hyperlanes ahead, there's a system with a sightseeing planet. Pirates are running rampant, attacking passenger ships there."

"Heh. Sightseeing, huh? Maybe we could kill pirates and take a nice vacation all at once."

"The docking there is expensive, but you're the captain. We'll listen to you. A vacation would be nice."

"Then let's go with that." A little detour sounded like some much-needed fun for me and my crew. My dream of a stand-alone house still loomed on the horizon, but it was a long way off. Didn't hurt to rest in the meantime.

I switched off the FTL drive as we returned to Arein Tertius. I prepared to send a docking request to… *Hm?*

"Doesn't the colony look kinda…off?" I asked.

"Huh?" Elma gasped. "Oh, wow, it does. Is that district out of power?"

"It seems to be, yes," Mimi said. "I wonder what's wrong. Their docking bay's guide lights are blinking red too."

While we waited and watched, spaceships poured out of their docking bay like ants fleeing the colony.

"What should we do?" Elma wondered aloud.

"That's a good question," I said. "Mimi, can you connect us to the Port Authority?"

"Yes, Captain. I'll bring them up on the main monitor." Mimi tried to open the connection, but they didn't pick up at first. Finally, after several tries, she got a response.

"This is the Port Authority! We're busy at this moment!"

"Hey, buddy, calm down. I'm Captain Hiro from the mercenary guild. We just got back from crushing a pirate base, and it looks like something's

wrong in the colony. What's going on?"

"A mercenary?! Hey, do you have power armor on your ship?!"

"Huh? Uh, yeah?"

"Save us! Our colony is being attacked by these mysterious life-forms!"

His desperate words left us stunned and blinking at each other for a moment.

I began, "I mean, uh, we can't just—"

"We're mercenaries," Elma said firmly. "Our lives aren't so cheap that we work for free."

Elma held her ground, but Mimi fidgeted in the operator's chair. I couldn't blame her.

"You want money at a time like this?!" the Port Authority worker screamed.

"I always want money," I cut in. "If I'm risking my life, don't I deserve a return? Didn't you put a request in to the mercenary guild?"

"W-we might have, but I don't know!"

"You don't know? Well, show us to an empty hangar. Do your job before you start complaining at me."

"O-okay, fine. Umm, thirty-two… No, go to hangar three!"

"Gotcha. We're on our way."

We hung up and followed the guide beacons that lit up to mark our route.

"Are we going in?" Elma raised an eyebrow. "Shouldn't we keep our necks *out* of stuff like this?"

"I dunno, but this could be good money," I said. "Let's at least hear what they have to say. We might even be able to make money by just guarding the port until Serena gets back."

"Are you sure about this?" Mimi asked, worried.

“As long as I wear power armor, I don’t think anything bad will happen. I hope.”

I had to dock here eventually to collect my rewards from the pirate hunting venture anyway. I definitely didn’t want to see the place destroyed before I could cash in.

We docked without incident, and I left the ship to Mimi and Elma while I contacted the mercenary guild from the cargo hold.

“I really haven’t touched this since I came to this universe,” I mused as I stood before the power armor.

Power armor was basically…well, armor with power. It made appearances in all kinds of sci-fi novels and video games. The wearer got both thick, protective plating and—thanks to the core installed in the armor—a powerful firearm. With this stuff on, I’d be like a walking tank. In *Stella Online*, power armor was next to impossible to defeat if you didn’t have some yourself to fight back with.

“Maybe I’d better bring some other gear too.” The power armor would limit my ability to use long-range weapons like rifles, but I could still carry my usual laser gun, a backup energy pack, and some hand grenades.

“Hmm… Which one? Okay, I choose you.”

I clipped plasma grenades to my belt. When pressed, they’d spew super-hot plasma after three and a half seconds of delay and turn any living thing in their path into ash. Plus, there was no explosion, so I could use it in an enclosed space if I had to.

“Well, this *is* an unknown monster attack.”

I hoped this would be enough. According to the Port Authority, whatever was attacking the colony required power armor to defeat. There was definitely nothing like that in *Stella Online*. How annoying.

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Nuclear-Powered Strength-Boosting Artificial Exoskeleton. That was the official name of power armor, but I hope that makes it clear why everyone just called it power armor instead.

It came in several varieties. Most face-to-face fights in *Stella Online* took place in small, enclosed spaces where mobility was important. Outmaneuvering an unarmored human was a huge advantage in a scenario like that, but it actually wasn't the most vital function that power armor provided.

Then what was, you ask?

"Humph!" I grappled with a white monster, using power alone to crush it in a bear hug, throw it aside, and stomp it into dust. Without missing a beat, I snagged a smaller beast, tore it apart, and threw it at a wall. Then I charged into a cluster of medium-sized monsters, smashing them with a brutal body slam. One managed to dodge and grab at me, but I unleashed a high-tension electric current that shocked it before shooting down the fleeing monsters with the laser guns mounted on my shoulders.

"Ha ha ha! Raw power wins again!" I bellowed, knowing full well how corny it sounded.

Raw power. That was what the armor was truly for. Mobility helped in small doses, but if you were wearing power armor, you were probably getting up close and personal. I needed to withstand enemy attacks and strike back with overwhelming power with both fists and heavy firearms. Once I had all that, I was good so long as I could hit my targets.

"This is the Port Authority. It seems you've secured the area. Thank you."

"Yeah. No prob, as long as I get my reward through the mercenary guild."

I stacked up the monster carcasses and glanced at my armor's readings. Still undamaged. Joint actuators doing well. Weapons online. And I had 99.7 percent of my energy store remaining.

Just what I'd expect from TMPA-13 Rikishi mk-III power armor. Harite super-pressurized current emissions devices bolstered each of my hands, and Shiko impact-magnification devices supported my legs. On my shoulders sat high-emission Shikiri laser guns.

On top of all that, I had a Buchikamashi shield function that allowed me to execute a high-speed tackle from super-short range. Of course, I could also just use the shield as a shield.

All of this came packed into one of the largest suits of power armor out there, a true heavy armor class. That meant high generator output but also a good payload of heavy firearms.

To be honest, the thing was so big, it kind of had a roly-poly look to it. If armor could be chubby, this sure was. Those legs had to be stout to handle so much weight. The manufacturer clearly hadn't put much thought into aesthetics. I had to repaint it metallic silver to get rid of the tacky original paint job. It wasn't tacky in a cool way either—it was just tasteless. It looked like a mecha version of a sumo wrestler.

But it was strong, let me tell you! Considering what I wanted from it, this armor was optimal. It might've looked like meme armor, but it packed a wallop. In *Stella Online*, this was a high-tier piece of gear.

Player-versus-player events were full of this kind of armor, which resulted in plenty of inside jokes about its looks. Event announcers would say things like, *And here we begin the New Year's grand sumo tournament of* Stella Online*!* Or even, *Today's first round gives us the mountain, Captain Black of the east, and the ocean, Captain Hiro of the west!*

I had to wonder why this stuff was made, but only the SOL devs knew the truth. Appearances aside, at least it worked well, even in this universe. Maybe power armor was the same across universes?

"Master Hiro?" Mimi said, snapping me out of my day-dreaming. "Are you okay out there?"

"Y-yeah, I'm fine. Just thinking. What's up?"

"We've received a rescue request from the guild. Do you remember the Inagawa Technologies hospital that performed our physicals? They're treating the wounded there, but the monsters are starting to gather near it."

"Will this area be fine?" I asked.

"A power armor troop from the imperial army will arrive soon. They're offering 50,000 Ener for a successful defense and for providing battle data."

“That’s a low price for risking my life. I’d be in real danger if I didn’t have this armor.”

“Well, that’s why they told you to wear it,” Elma countered. “What are you gonna do about Inagawa?”

“I’ll go. Is the reward good?”

“It’s double the port’s defense: 100,000 Ener.”

“That’ll do. Mind guiding me there, Mimi?”

“Yes, Captain!”

I picked up a weapon that I’d tossed aside in the scuffle and followed the map on my power armor’s HUD display, the metal of my suit clanking as I went.

“You’re crazy for fighting up close,” Elma said. “You’re not a martial artist, are you?”

“Not really, but sometimes you just have to get in close. Figured I might as well try it in a less dangerous situation.”

“True.”

I checked my weapon as I ran. My variable focus laser launcher could fight off enemies in power armor by concentrating the lasers together, while dealing lethal damage to unarmored enemies with split lasers. Its weight made it a little unwieldy, but my power armor took care of that problem.

“Continue forward, and you will see an elevator to your right,” Mimi informed me. “Take that and head to the middle level.”

“Right on.” I didn’t see any of those pasty white monsters in this area, but the memory of fighting them suddenly connected the dots in my mind. “Y’know, those monsters look like the artificial meat we saw at that plant.”

“I had the same thought…” Mimi murmured.

“They said they wouldn’t survive if they left the plant, but maybe their management was wrong,” Elma said.

“It might not just be that plant,” I said. “All artificial meat is white from what I’ve seen, so it could be others as well.”

I squeezed the bulky power armor into an elevator and headed for the middle level. The elevator groaned a little at the weight but proceeded smoothly nonetheless.

"You two watch out around the ship too," I told them. "Though I doubt they'll come in as long as the hatch is closed."

"No worries there," Elma assured me. "I'm keeping an eye on the hatch's security cams, and I have shields up on low output."

"Good job. Just in case, though."

The Krishna's defense could withstand nuclear, biological, and chemical weapons—meaning if its shields were up, those monsters had no chance. This isn't me foreshadowing; it's downright impossible to break through. Even in my power armor, I'd have a tough time getting through those shields. This laser launcher wasn't enough to get through the shields made by the Krishna's generator. It was strong, but only about as strong as the shoddy lasers on pirate ships.

"This is awful," I said as the elevator reached its destination and the doors slid open.

Pure pandemonium greeted me. A twitching leg dangled from a monster's maw. Another beast drooled over some unfortunate fallen fighter. A cluster of smaller monsters swarmed over someone. And this was just my first impression. Similar scenes played out in all directions.

No matter their size, every one of the horrible monsters had a round mouth lined with razor-sharp teeth. While the smaller ones were little more than tentacle monsters of the sort we'd seen in the food plant, the larger ones had actual arms and legs. Yes, that's right; they were tentacle monsters, but don't expect this story to go *that* way. They were just hungry. Honestly, that was almost as gross as the alternative.

"Eugh, this is just bad," Elma groaned.

"Is Mimi okay?"

"When she saw your display, she went pale and curled up."

"Let her know she doesn't have to look. Also, tell me if you see signs of survivors."

"Aye-aye, Captain. There at least aren't any on the road."

I couldn't let those monsters onto the elevator, so I readied my laser launcher the moment I stepped off.

"Time to cleanse some filth!"

I sprayed split laser fire in all directions, vaporizing monsters to ash. With no survivors to worry about, I could shoot wildly to clear out the beasts with abandon. They'd have a tough time taking me down in the armor; even then, they probably couldn't do much more than dent it even with all those claws and teeth. In the meantime, my firepower could wipe them out with a thought.

I kept firing, taking down the larger ones with lasers and kicking aside the smaller ones. Occasionally, the smaller ones would cling to my armor, forcing me to yank them away and stomp them into dust. My electrified hands made easy work of them.

"If I were you, I'd be vomiting all over the place," Elma commented.

"You already vomit when you drink too much. No need for more." I grinned wryly, stomping on a small fry.

Some of the larger monsters started to catch on and turned tail to flee. *You're not getting away that easy.* Continuous fire from both my handheld laser launcher and my shoulder guns obliterated them as I charged toward the hospital.

"Take a right at the next intersection and you'll be there," Elma said.

"Gotcha." My legs clanked loudly as I ran on.

There were still no survivors on the road; hopefully, they'd gotten inside and barricaded the doors or found one of the colony's emergency shelters.

"Wow," I said breathlessly as I rounded the corner. A teeming mass of monsters roiled before the doors of the general hospital. "Wonder why they're all gathering here."

"Who knows? Maybe they need physicals?" Elma joked.

"The thought of monsters all jostling into a hospital for physicals is a little too surreal for me." I turned my laser launcher on the crowd of monsters. "Yeeeeeah! Let's rock and roll!"

Split lasers blasted through the beasts at the speed of light. A shower of red blasted through their ranks, blowing away the encroaching monsters. Normally, high-output lasers might do damage via heat and explosions, but in *Stella Online*, lasers were used to pierce directly through targets and vaporize them. I continued my wild assault on the monsters outside the hospital.

"I don't mind as long as it gets the job done, but it is weird," I mused. Maybe lasers back in my universe worked on a different principle than the ones here.

"What is?" Elma asked.

"Oh, nothing. What's with these monsters? Does this happen often?"

"I've never heard of it happening," Mimi piped up.

"If things like this were happening regularly, the meat plants and manufacturers would be in deep doo-doo," Elma said dryly.

"Sounds about right." People would quickly turn against cultured meat if this was the price they had to pay for it. There had definitely been a number of casualties; no doubt the government would make sure this never happened again. "Hey, what if they were actually unlicensed frauds?"

"That's a scary thought. Like, what are they feeding those things?"

"According to the Kobe beef pamphlet," Mimi said, "it's important to have good feed to make good meat."

"I don't think that's what Elma's worried about." We chatted as I continued to massacre the fleshy beasts. *What's that? What happened to rocking and rolling, you ask? Well, there's not much of that in this cleanup work. Can't have rock without tension, unfortunately.*

"Elma, we have a call from the hospital," Mimi announced.

"All right. Connect us."

A man's voice came in over the comms.

"This is Inagawa Technologies General Hospital. I'm Amurei from the security division. Who am I speaking to?"

"I'm Captain Hiro," I told him. "I got a rescue request from the guild, so I ran over to help. Currently, I'm dealing with the monsters in front of

the hospital.”

“I’m Elma. I take care of information support as a member of his crew.”

“My name is Mimi. I work as an operator.”

“Oh, you’re all from the mercenary guild? Thank goodness.” The man, Amurei, heaved a sigh of relief. “The wall that’s keeping us safe is about to break.”

“This is all it took? Shouldn’t the walls be thick to keep the place airtight?” I said.

“It seems their fluids are caustic. Normally, the colony’s airtight walls aren’t made with caustic substances in mind.”

“I see.” The hospital might not protect against acids if it was just aiming to be airtight, but my power armor was more than capable of taking the monsters’ spit and blood without any corrosion. “Leave the outside to me. They haven’t gotten in yet, right?”

“Not yet, sir. Once you’ve eliminated them, could you harvest a sample? We would like to make nanomachines to destroy them.”

“Sure. Do you need a live sample?”

“No, sir. A corpse is fine.”

“Great. Uhh… Do you mind if it’s laser-burned?”

“I’m only a security guard, so I don’t know. But I assume raw is better.”

“Probably. Understood.” Once I culled their numbers, I could finish them off with some close combat instead of lasers. *Now, back to cleanup duty.*

“Master Hiro, I’m picking up traces of something new. It seems strange…” Mimi said.

“Strange? Strange how? I need more specifics,” I said.

“Umm… It looks like the other ones, but it also looks human. Oh, and it’s rapidly accelerating.”

“Say what?” I analyzed the highlighted dot on my minimap. Thanks to the power armor’s sensors, I could make out strange footsteps coming from behind a building. Then *it* appeared. “Uhhh, what the hell is that?”

Three distorted legs stomped toward me. The monster was slim, but its two arms were corded in muscle. A round mouth revealed horrifying rows of sharp fangs. But worst of all were the eyes. They were everywhere, covering the thing’s torso, darting in all directions before focusing suddenly on me.

I gasped. “Human eyes?”

“Here it comes, Master Hiro!” Mimi cried.

That moment I spent being disgusted nearly cost me everything. The monster pounced when it noticed my hesitation.

“Damn!”

The monster closed the ten-meter-plus space between us in a flash. I held my breath as I ditched my laser launcher to grab the beastly fist rocketing toward me. *Hey, wait, why is it so fast if I’m holding my breath?!*

“Urk?!”

Just as I caught the monster’s fist, it whipped the other one at me. I had only a heartbeat before that muscular fist pummeled me into dust, but fortunately, my shield blew it away with thunderous force.

“Gyoooar?!” The monster howled and crouched down on the ground. It didn’t stay down long, though, instantly lunging back at me. It swung, and two loud bangs rang out around me, but the beast didn’t actually manage to strike my armor. “Groooar!”

“Ha ha ha! Aah, the blessings of modern civilization.”

Try as it might, the monster’s attacks proved feckless. My shields, designed to withstand space debris, easily absorbed the punches that would’ve otherwise shattered my skull. While it kept swinging, I activated the lasers on my shoulders, training them on the beast.

“See ya,” I said. The lasers blasted through the thing’s head and chest and did…nothing? “Huh?”

The monster shook itself, barely fazed by the burn marks already closing up on its head, neck, and chest—the latter of which I’d hit *three* times. A grotesque, fleshy sound filled the air while it repaired itself.

“You’re a stubborn one, huh?”

“Groooh!” The beast went right back on the offensive. While my shield could repel its assault, it consumed far too much energy to last much longer. Even now, the power armor’s energy tank was running dangerously low.

I had to fight back. I shot at it point-blank with my shoulder lasers and stomped on it with my impact-magnifying legs. For good measure, I burned it to a crisp with the laser launcher.

“Graaah.”

“You’re *seriously* tough, damn!” I still couldn’t kill the thing. My energy reserves were blinking red. Once those shields were gone, I had no clue if the beast would tear right through my armor.

I didn’t have many options left. “I didn’t wanna do this, but I guess I have to.”

It was time to employ the ace up my sleeve. This technique worked best when I had the numerical advantage to keep my opponent from using their power armor. But hey, it ought to work fine here.

“Get over here, you fiend!” I roared, taking down my shield. I squatted down and opened my arms wide.

“Grooooah!” The monster charged in. Fast. I sucked in a breath, willing myself to hold firm.

“And…” The monster jabbed with its right claw. I swatted aside the attack and curled my arm around the beast’s. With its arms trapped, I could pin it down. “There! Got you now!”

I locked the power armor in place and jumped out through the emergency exit. Climbing up the back of the machine put me face-to-face with the hideous creature.

“Can’t move, huh? This technique lets me either put us into a deadlock or have my friends come over and help me beat the tar out of you.”

I raised my hand, displaying a plasma grenade. Nothing could regenerate after a blast like that.

The beast apparently realized that. “Graaaaah!” it wailed.

“Man, you’re loud. Eat this and maybe you’ll shut up.” I pressed the detonate button and threw the grenade into the screaming maw of the monster. Then I leaped down off my armor and booked it.

An explosion of light erupted behind me.

“Whoa?!” I covered my eyes. Hot wind from the super-heated grenade gusted over me. *Dang, that’s hot! I should’ve gotten farther away!*

For a moment, I kept covering my head, reeling from the blast. When I could, I peeked past my hands. All that remained of the battle was my red-hot power armor and a single arm blasted off the beast. No regenerating this time.

“Whew. What an annoying enemy.”

I used my terminal to activate the power armor’s emergency cooling function. Point-blank plasma grenades did some insane damage, but that thick armor should have withstood it. While the machine cooled, a call pinged on my terminal.

“Master Hiro, are you okay?!” Mimi said.

“Yeah. All good, no problem. He was a tough one, though. I had to pull out a secret technique.”

“Thank goodness,” Mimi said. “We can only see things from the power armor’s perspective, so it was an awful shock when you stopped moving and took so much damage.”

“Yeah, sorry to make you worry so much. But he’s dealt with now, and the power armor can still move, so I think I’ll be fine.” The power armor finished cooling while we talked, so I climbed back into it and ran a quick check. Sensors were less accurate due to the heat and the artificial muscles were weaker, but it was still mobile.

“Tough fight, huh?” Elma sneered. “Maybe you needed the exercise.”

“Maybe,” I said. “I’ll definitely sleep well tonight.”

I rounded up a few monster carcasses to pile in front of the hospital door. I added that blown-off, scorched arm last.

“Will this work for your sample?” I asked the security guy.

“Oh, er… Just a moment.”

I guess he’s checking with the researchers.

Meanwhile, I stacked up the rest of the carnage. Things could get difficult during the cleanup in a closed environment like this if bodies and gases weren’t dealt with swiftly.

“Well, well!” a familiar voice called out over the comms. “It’s been a while, Hiro. Guess you saved my life again, huh?”

“Dr. Shouko?”

“Yep, it’s me! Doesn’t it feel like fate that you’ve saved me three times now?”

“Uhh, I guess?” I wouldn’t call it fate so much as the bad luck we both seemed to draw.

“Mind sharing your vision with me?” she said.

“Sure. Mimi?”

“Yes, sir. Sharing now.”

Dr. Shouko hummed in surprise. “Incredible. Did you fight this all alone?”

“I did. But I mean, I had power armor on.” I picked up the laser launcher and moved over to the pile of corpses.

“Are these the samples?” Dr. Shouko asked.

“Yeah. I picked two of the best-looking small, medium, and large ones. Plus that creepy thing I just blew up.” I pointed at the burned arm.

“It’s charred rather badly… Did you happen to notice anything strange about these creatures?”

“The small and large ones were about as intelligent as animals, but more violent and willing to act on their hunger. They ignored their disadvantage and came charging in.”

“I see. Were the medium ones different?”

“Compared to the others, they were smarter. They’d try to use the small and large ones as bait and take me by surprise. When they knew they were at a disadvantage, they tried to run away.”

“Wow, that’s very interesting,” Dr. Shouko replied. “Maybe their brains are more developed than we presumed.”

“Probably, yeah. Also, the last one, with all the eyes, was *aggressive*. A real violent demon. It was also bizarrely fast, and it had incredible regenerative abilities. When I shot it with lasers, it would recover and come right back at me. It’s clearly a lot stronger than the others.”

“Interesting. A mutant, perhaps? Either way, I’ll be sure to look into it.”

“Will these samples be enough?” I asked her.

“Yeah, I think so. I’ll be on my way there shortly. Stay on guard, okay?”

“Understood. I’ll keep my eyes peeled.”

I hung up and focused on cleaning up the corpses while Mimi and Elma kept an eye out for enemies.

“Should I burn this with my laser, you think?” I said.

“It looks like high-quality protein, so I’d say to leave it,” Elma told me. “The colony might be able to find some use for it.”

“Really? All right,” I said.

With the coast clear, people in yellow hazmat suits emerged from the hospital carrying insulated stretchers, perhaps for the samples I’d gathered. One raised her hand as she jogged over to me. “Hey, thanks a ton!” she said. “That power armor looks strong.”

“Dr. Shouko, is that you?” I said. “I barely recognized you in all that gear.”

“Yeah, it’s me. Thanks again, really. I heard that they put out a rescue request, but who knew you’d be the one to arrive?”

“Fate works in mysterious ways,” I said. “Although Mimi and Elma were the ones who told me about the request.”

“Is that true? I oughta thank them.”

“Uh, so what do I do now?” I asked, feeling a bit awkward.

“I’m going to make those nanomachines right now. I probably won’t need more than two hours, so could you keep this area safe in the meantime? That’s what the higher-ups want, anyway.”

“Understood.”

“Awesome. Good luck!” Dr. Shouko returned to her circle of researchers to recover samples. Eventually, she came back and said, “We’d also like more samples of the small ones.”

“They’re piled up over there.” I pointed at a stack. “Take all you like. The quality is all over the place, but I’m sure you’ll find something you want.”

“Okay.”

I kept my laser launcher on hand to protect the researchers. On a closer look, I found that a couple of those people in hazmat suits weren’t scientists after all; they carried their own laser guns at the ready. Our combined presence kept the researchers safe until they could recover what they needed and retreat back into the hospital. Alone again, I returned to cleaning.

“They said they’ll make nanomachine exterminators,” I said to Mimi and Elma. “Is that something they can just do?”

“Who knows?” Elma said.

“This general hospital has a high-tech positron AI for research and the materials required for healing nanomachines,” Mimi said. “It is certainly possible.”

“Are exterminator nanomachines dangerous?”

“I dunno,” Elma answered, “but the plant tour guide said they had anti-escape mechanisms that relied on nanomachines. I bet they really can make it so they only work on those monsters.”

I was blown away. “Wow. That’s actually awesome.”

I kept my guard up while continuing cleaning duty. The sound of distant battles made it clear the danger had not yet passed, though it did seem like I had more help now. Perhaps Serena’s Pirate Hunting Unit had returned and joined the fray. In any case, my guard post was calm, and the researchers did their work in peace.

***

Machinery and vehicles whirred. Voices echoed around a sanitary white room furnished with stark tables and chairs. I sat at one such table, finally freed from the confines of my power armor.

“I really can’t thank you enough,” Dr. Shouko said as she offered me a bottle. It seemed to be some sort of chilled, murky-white sports drink. “That’s three rescues now, and every single time, I thought I was really done for. Out of luck.”

“What’s this?” I asked.

“It’s kinda like a rehydration drink. This one tastes better than most.”

I accepted with a “Sure, why not?” and took a sip. *Wow, it’s just like Pocari Sweat.*

“Good job out there,” Dr. Shouko said. “I know it must’ve been hard.”

“Kinda, yeah. But thanks to the power armor, I wasn’t in much danger.”

The researchers had invited me inside once their anti-monster nanomachines were complete. It felt incredible to take off that heavy armor and wash up. Dr. Shouko made a point of welcoming me and getting me whatever I needed. Apparently, she'd been picked for this assignment because of our relationship.

I could have returned to the Krishna, but I had to clean off the monster goo caking the power armor anyway. It could carry diseases or something. Seeing as I had to pause for that anyway, it made sense to take a little rest.

"Are you done with your side of the work, Doctor?" I asked her.

"Yeah, I'm all done. The researchers might need to make some small fixes, but they're so minor that I doubt my help is needed." She shrugged and waved it off.

"Did you find out anything about the one with all the eyes?" Dr. Shouko's smile wavered. Looked like all we still knew was that it was fast as heck and could regenerate.

"Ah, whatever," I said. "It doesn't matter as long as it doesn't hurt me or my crew."

"Sorry…" Her apologetic silence said everything: that thing must've had my genetic data in it, the very same data that was stolen from Inagawa Technologies. *Inagawa isn't very trustworthy, is it?*

"I don't think I've ever met anyone as unlucky as you, Dr. Shouko. That's the third time in about a month that you've been put in danger."

"Heh, yeah. Kind of an outlier in terms of probability, right? The fact that you saved my life every time makes it feel like fate's at work."

"Do you believe in that stuff?" I raised an eyebrow. A doctor and researcher banking on the supernatural?

"Pssh, no," she said. "But what if all this stuff happening in a short period of time makes me have a change of heart?"

"I see. Well, how about you go along with fate and be my ship's doctor?"

Dr. Shouko paused for a beat before breaking out into a smile. "That sounds nice, but a mercenary ship doesn't need a doctor, does it? You guys

work close to colonies, so if you need emergency attention, you can use a colony's facilities. Your medical pod should be able to take care of anything else. Deep-space investigation and pioneering ships—basically, stuff adventurers would do—are a different story, but…I'd just be stuck on a ship without satisfactory research facilities and subjects."

"That's a shame." Guess I wasn't adding to my harem today. *Huh? My motives are impure, you say? But that's just how men are, right?* She was a bespectacled beauty with Mimi-tier breasts; I had to at least try.

"Hee hee! What's that look in your eyes?"

"It's nothing but a sign that I'm a healthy man," I said.

"Are they really that great? They make my shoulders ache, and guys like you gawk at them. I don't really like them." Dr. Shouko lifted her breasts up with her hands. *What a sight. I love it. Lord, have mercy on me.* "Jeez, are you praying?"

"To men, the feminine form is a fascinating mystery—something you pursue but never quite attain."

"That's a boring mystery." Dr. Shouko laughed and stood up. "Well, I'd say our conversation is at an end. Your power armor should be good and sanitized by now."

"Aye-aye." I stood up and saluted Dr. Shouko, a woman of such gracious hospitality.

***

I returned home without incident. Soldiers in power armor were patrolling the colony, killing off any stragglers still trying to attack. The soldiers stopped me now and then, curious as to why this outsider was tromping around in power armor with a huge gun. I had to show them the guild request to rescue the hospital more than once before they released me.

"So did they ever find out where the monsters came from?" I asked Mimi and Elma. They were on the ship, but I was still making my way back.

“There are no reports so far,” Mimi said. “However, it seems all the tech organizations’ countermeasures are successfully exterminating them.”

“Wait, *all* of them? It wasn’t Inagawa’s nanomachines, then?”

“Yes. There are reports of military robo-weapon manufacturer Eagle Dynamics dispatching large amounts of specialized battle robots to each colony. Chemical manufacturer Cyclone has also successfully synthesized a fatal poison that only affects the monsters and provided syringes to imperial soldiers. Other manufacturers have performed similar measures.”

“The army started exterminating too, and the Pirate Hunting Unit just made it home. I think we can assume the situation’s coming to a close,” Elma said.

“Cool. What a catastrophe, though. We made money off of it, but I feel bad for the people who got injured or worse.”

“For sure.” Elma nodded. “Oh, by the way, you don’t have to distribute your gains to us this time.”

“Huh?” I said. “Why not?”

“If it were earned aboard the ship, then we would be risking our lives too. But you’re the only one who went out there. Taking your money would just be selfish of us.”

“You sure?” They’d supported me during the battle, after all.

“I agree,” Mimi chimed in. “Taking a portion of the money that you risked your life for would simply be ridiculous.”

“Okay, then. If you’re sure.” If they insisted on it, then I couldn’t stop them. Besides, if I were in their position, I’d probably feel the same. “This colony’s going to be in a panic for some time now.”

Elma shrugged. “There’s nothing we can do about it. Fortunately, we have plenty of food and water for ourselves. Once we get our rewards, we can just fly off to our next stop.”

“It would be dangerous to leave the ship until then,” Mimi added. “We should wait inside.”

“True,” I said. “We’ll just have to laze around in the ship. Heh heh… What a shame, right?” A little exercise, a little play… But look at me

getting all worked up from one fight. *I'll have to put those girls to work calming me down.*

"Go easy on us, okay?" Elma said with a cringe.

"What do you mean?" Mimi blinked, the picture of innocence. *Good, good.*

"You girls must be tired, right?" I said. "I'll be fine out here. Go enjoy a nice bath if you want."

"Hm? Okay. Please be careful, Master Hiro."

"Absolutely. I'll see you girls later." I hung up and headed for the elevator. Once I finally made it home, it was time for more *wrestling*.

***

The sudden monster attack, in all of its inconvenient timing, sent a shockwave through the colony. It took five whole days for the army and the Port Authority to pay out my rewards. Of course, Inagawa Technologies paid immediately.

And what did we do over those five days? Well, we repaired the power armor after all the damage it suffered from those monsters. And then, well…I enjoyed some quality time with Mimi and Elma. *Aww, don't make me say it.* But we didn't fool around *all* day. I mean, I wasn't superhuman.

Though I will admit that we did you-know-what multiple times, alternatingly. Elma acted all annoyed at first, but she was definitely excited toward the end. Mimi was momentarily bewildered, but that didn't last long.

"Ah, what a refreshing morning," I said joyfully.

"Yeah, whatever," Elma groaned.

"Mimi, Elma's being mean," I whined.

"I think she's just embarrassed," Mimi said. "Elma has trouble being straightforward sometimes."

"Hngh!" Elma blurted.

Mimi smiled, sweet and unassuming as ever, even as she delivered that devastating blow to Elma's pride. Elma blushed and pouted in silence; not even that stubborn elf could truly get angry at Mimi for long.

"Ha ha. You're so cute, Elma," I said. I wouldn't go on torturing her, though. "Anyway, our rewards were finally paid out. Time to distribute them. The grand total, including loot, comes to 835,464 Ener. With our thirty-day mission reward of 1,500,000 Ener and my personal bonus of 372,514 Ener, our total is 2,707,978 Ener."

"That took forever, but darn if we didn't make a load of cash," Elma said.

"Incredible…" Mimi gawked at the sum.

In truth, it was a pretty fair cut. Plus, we'd snuck in physical exams and a debt of gratitude from Serena. Not bad for a month's work.

"Elma, your cut is 81,239 Ener," I said. "Mimi, yours is 13,539 Ener." My cut was 2,613,200 Ener. This brought my total assets to 17,022,017 Ener. *Hmm… Should I buy a new ship?*

"What's on your mind?" Elma asked me.

"I've got over 17,000,000 now, so I was wondering if I should get a mothership."

"A…mothership?" Mimi asked.

"It's a big ship that can serve as a dock for small ones," Elma explained. "They have big cargo holds too, so we could do transport work. Although 17,000,000 won't buy a very high-quality one. Add in maintenance costs, and you'll want around double that."

"Dang, really? Hmm… We'll have to save up more, then. I don't wanna half-ass things."

"It's rather hard to conceptualize 17,000,000 Ener," Mimi muttered.

"It's a big number for mercs who buy and sell ships, but it's not that much in the grand scheme of things," Elma said.

"Just a small fortune, huh?" I sighed.

"We are not on the same wavelength when it comes to what constitutes a 'fortune,'" Mimi said. She held her head, struggling to fathom

the sums. Normally, a first-class warrant officer would earn 4,000 Ener per month, meaning Mimi's 13,000 was well above what she'd earn if she worked for the military.

"For now, how about we go to whatever resort system Mimi wants to see?" I said. "Depending on how much we earn there, we can look into a ship. Having a mothership would dramatically increase our earning potential."

Hauling cargo around could net us hundreds of thousands or even millions of Ener. Plus, we could use more mobile ships to hunt pirates who tried to hit us along the way. Two birds with one stone, as long as we had the skill to protect the mothership.

"The ruckus is calming down. I say we get our rewards and get out of here," I said.

"Yes, sir!" Mimi said.

"Gotcha, boss," Elma said.

Mimi swung into action, checking the ship's equipment on her tablet, while Elma settled into the co-pilot's chair and started the ship's self-check. I left the preparations to the pros and examined my power armor instead. If I ever needed it again, I'd want it in good working order.

Thus, we prepared to jet off to our next galaxy-hopping adventure.

Chapter 10:
Lieutenant Cute-but-Annoying

"YOU WON'T escape me."

"Uh-oh."

We spent three days getting everything ready: provisions, fuel, and maintenance. The Krishna was in tip-top shape and ready to blast off into the universe.

Then Serena returned. And she wasn't in her uniform this time.

"Ma'am?!" I panicked. Why was she here in her street clothes? "Uh, ma'am, please? Ma'am, please, ma'am, I'm begging you. Ma'am!"

"What's with that response?!" Serena said. "E-excuse me! Stop pushing me! Rude! This is beyond disrespectful! I am the daughter of Marquess Holz, I'll have you know!"

"Tch. Damn, you're annoying."

"Pardon? Did you just call me *annoying*?!" Serena's jaw dropped at my blatant dismissal. *Oh? What's that? Are you gonna use your noble rights or whatever to cut me down without remorse?*

"Erm, Master Hiro? I'm not sure that's a good way to speak to her…" Mimi said.

"How fearless can one man get?" Elma muttered.

Mimi's face drained as she watched me shove the lieutenant commander away; Elma just shook her head. *Hey, what's the problem? I don't know how this noble feels, but the Krishna is my ship. She can't just barge into my domain.*

"What's the deal?" I said. "Didn't you say you'd give up on trying to recruit me?"

"Ngh! Y-yes, I suppose I did, but…"

"But?"

“It’s not fair! I’m buried in work, but you all get to go enjoy yourselves in the Cierra System’s resorts?! That’s the definition of unfair!” Serena jabbed a finger at us.

“Ugh. How annoying can she be?” I griped. *How’d she know we’re going there, anyway? Now I’m scared.*

“I heard that! You called me annoying again!”

I ignored Serena’s palpable disappointment and sighed. What else could I call her but annoying? What other word could describe the disruption her every appearance brought with it, as if she had planned specifically to arrive right when we were about to leave?

“That’s mean even for you, Hiro,” Elma said. “You’re usually nice to girls.”

“I wouldn’t mind if she was just a big shot, but she’s the marquess’s daughter. If I’m too nice to her, she might get overly attached.”

“Attached?! What am I, some sort of pet?!” Serena flushed with fury.

“You may be having the opposite effect,” Mimi warned.

Wait, really? Is Serena getting more attached every time I try to push her away?

“So for real, what’s the deal?” I said. “Yes, we’re about to go on vacation in the Cierra System. Well, a working vacation. We’ll still take down some pirates here and there.”

“Well, I think it’s, erm…imprudent,” Serena said.

“Imprudent?” I parroted.

“Yes. People died and property was damaged in that bioterrorist attack. Do you not think it’s imprudent to go on vacation during such a difficult time for the colony?”

“I see.” I nodded.

“Heh. I’m glad you understand. Perhaps you could remain—”

“It has nothing to do with us, though,” I cut in. “Now, we’ve gotta get going. Can you leave, please? I’d say it’s way more imprudent to use that as an excuse to keep us around.”

“Aah!” Serena screamed. “No, you can’t! It’s wrong for a man to lay hands upon an unwed noblewoman! Aah! I’ll cut you down for this slight, I swear! It is my right!”

“God, how annoying are you, really?! You look sober, but you must be drunk!” I tried to push Serena out of the cafeteria, but she locked herself in the doorway using all four limbs, resisting for dear life. I’d have to pry her out with the damn power armor at this rate.

“Ugh, jeez. Calm down, you two. C’mon.” Elma stepped between us and forced us apart. Resisting wouldn’t do me much good here, so I raised my hands in surrender and settled in a chair. Mimi sat next to me while Serena and Elma sat across from us.

“Okay.” I sighed. “I’ll ask you one more time. What’s the deal? We want to get out of this star system. If you don’t give me a good reason for impeding our freedom, then I’m going to use my authority as captain to have these two help me throw you out of the ship.” I glared at Serena in an attempt at intimidation.

It worked.

“Urk…” She averted her eyes, refusing to look at any of us. “I envy you all. So I wanted to come and stop you.”

“Huh?”

“I’m jealous, and I wanted to stop you! Do you have a problem with that?!” Serena barked.

“A lot of problems, yeah!” I said.

“In what universe is this fair?! I spend every last minute of every last hour of every last day looking at those damned tentacle monsters on the holo-display, poring over the data, attending strategy meetings, and writing reports! Yet *you* get to go to a resort! Why would I not come to stop you?!”

“That’s straight-up annoying! This really is just jealousy!”

“No, no, no! It’s not fair, it’s not fair! I wanna go on vacation!”

“You’re throwing a tantrum now?! What about your honor as a soldier or your pride as a noble?!”

The lieutenant commander banged her fists on the table and screamed. She must have been drinking before she came here, because the levelheaded soldier I knew before was totally gone.

"So you really just…came to stop us because you're jealous?" I asked.

Serena glared up at me and nodded. I smiled, prompting her to do the same. *Gotcha.*

"Okay, get out."

"Nooo! But I was so honest!" she howled.

"You were malicious! How am I supposed to sympathize?!"

Serena clung to the table in protest as I attempted to peel her off. Mimi was, of course, the one to put an end to our struggle. "Excuse me. May I speak?"

"What's up?" I asked.

"Well, Lieutenant Commander, I believe you know that throwing temper tantrums won't help," Mimi told her. "You know your position better than anyone. The fact that you're wearing street clothes means that you're off work, correct?"

"Right," Serena said.

"Then perhaps you're here for a breather or even to vent your feelings. You want to spend time with Master Hiro because he ignores your status and talks to you as you are. Is that right?"

Serena's sulky silence was answer enough.

"Spend time with *me*?" Mimi might have had some insight, but I was totally in the dark. Besides, I wasn't looking to take Serena out on another disastrous, drunken date. She reeked of trouble.

"How about we have a little party?" Elma proposed. "We don't have any organic food, but the Steel Chef makes good stuff. I've got some drinks too."

"Yeah, you do," I said. "Like the 100,000 Ener worth of stuff that's burning a hole in my cargo hold, right?" Elma visibly twitched at the reminder.

“Wh-why does it matter? You want to keep me here, don’t you?” Elma said.

“Yeah, true.” The pretty, reliable Elma was great to have around the ship, just like sweet little Mimi. But Serena? No way. That’d be a whole different ball game. “Okay, just for today, we can break out the drinks. And you owe me two now, Serena.”

“Urk! O-okay.” Serena’s debt to me was growing, which should have been a problem for her—unless she was just using that to remain close to me. *Oh, no.*

“How about we get to it?” I said. “We can call it a farewell party.”

“Yes, sir!” Mimi chirped. “I actually just had some new food shipped here! Let’s try it.”

Wait. New food? When had that happened? Mimi was picking up a few tricks from Elma. I had to wonder how packed the cargo hold was with them both sneaking in their favorite treats.

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“So, er… I can’t really think of anything, but anyway, cheers!”

“Cheers!”

After my flat, boring toast, the girls clinked their glasses together. They all had booze, but I stuck to my usual non-carbonated soda.

Mimi beamed. “Aah, what a lovely drink!”

“That’s the one I bought back at the factory,” Elma told her. “It was a little expensive…”

“You call 100,000 Ener *a little*?” I asked.

“I-It’s not that much money for mercenaries…”

“You all have a strange relationship with money,” Serena mused.

“N-not me!” Mimi said. “Master Hiro and Elma are just a little…”

“A little what?” Elma cut in. “Didn’t you beg Hiro for a new bath, washing machine, cooker, and all that stuff? How much was it? *Three* hundred thousand Ener?”

“Agreed. You’re just as bad,” I said.

“N-not at all…” Mimi murmured.

Whoever said “three women make a madhouse” was right. They had seemingly endless things to talk about, hopping from topic to topic. I struggled to follow the twisting threads of rapidly shifting conversation. *Can’t I just organize it all on a flash drive?*

Instead, I surveyed the spread of treats that arrived thanks to Mimi. I couldn’t even name half the stuff on the table. All kinds of cuisine awaited us. There must’ve been as many dishes as there were stars in the sky. Okay, maybe that’s a little hyperbolic.

I decided to inspect the dish closest to me. It was a pinkish pasta, or so it appeared. *It’s okay. It’s, uh, not moving or anything.* I won’t say what *it* was, but just imagining *it* made me shudder. I used my chopsticks to pick up a bit of pasta and examined it closely. *Okay, it’s pasta. It doesn’t LOOK like worms, at least.*

I put it in my mouth. It didn’t struggle or explode on my tongue, which was a relief. As for the taste…it was reminiscent of sea urchin. There was a sweet richness to it, making it pretty dang tasty altogether.

I was still chewing when I found the girls staring at me.

“What?” I said around a mouthful.

“Is that good?” Elma asked me.

“I don’t mind it. It’s sweet and thick… Why are you looking at me like that?”

“Umm, that’s called a spaceworm—” Mimi started.

“La la la, I can’t hear you!” I yelled. “This is sea urchin pasta! Urchin-flavored pasta made with advanced flavoring techniques!”

“That’s quite the attempt at self-deception…” Elma commented.

Mimi, why’d you buy this disgusting creature?! No, wait. This is pasta. It’s not disgusting, and it’s not a creature. It’s pasta!

“Why don’t you all try it? This sea urchin pasta is good.”

“Er, I would rather not.” Serena backed off.

Elma cringed. “Me neither.”

“I really shouldn’t…” And Mimi made three.

“You bought it! Why don’t you want it?” I pressed.

“Umm…”

“Aren’t you supposed to be trying all the food in the universe?” I said.

“Ulp… Yes.” Mimi plucked up a bit of worm, I mean, pasta. Pasta. Right. Tears shimmered in her eyes as she chewed, but suddenly she blinked, her whole face brightening. “Huh? It’s actually good.”

“Right? Pretend it’s sea urchin pasta, and it’s just fine,” I said.

“I agree. Yes, it’s just fine,” Mimi said.

Elma and Serena shared a wary glance.

“M-maybe I should try it too?” Elma said.

“A-agreed. We wouldn’t want to waste it,” Serena said.

Timidly, they nibbled at the pasta. Like Mimi, they cringed at first, but after a few bites, they blinked in surprise.

“It’s actually good, wow,” Elma marveled.

“Quite the delicate flavor…” Serena said.

“By the way, I can’t help but feel like someone put this in front of me on purpose,” I said. “I wonder why?”

“Erm, it’s just a coincidence,” Mimi said.

“Yeah, totally. Coincidence!” Elma echoed.

“Kinda crazy how all of *your* foods are clearly normal compared to mine.” Elma and Mimi sweated under the weight of my glare, but I didn’t push it any harder than that. “Whatever. How about we try this one next? Mimi, you first!”

“Eep?!” Mimi stiffened up and made a funny noise when she saw the plate I pushed at her. Orbs the size of marbles sat on it, glossy and black.

“What’s wrong? They’re all foods that *you* bought.”

“Eh heh heh…”

She was deflecting. *Nice try, cutie.* I pushed the plate at her again.

“Urk…” Teary-eyed, she plucked up a black marble in a trembling hand. The moment Mimi chomped down, she went absolutely, eerily still.

“How is it?” I asked.

“Well, um…not bad?” Mimi furrowed her brow and cocked her head.

Her reaction prompted the rest of us to try one of the strange marbles ourselves.

“Mm?” Elma said.

“Hmm?” Serena said.

“What is this weird flavor?” I wondered aloud. It was sweet but also salty and acidic, as though someone had added soy sauce to pudding. “What *is* this? Actually, never mind. Don’t tell me.” Seeing the look on Mimi’s face, I didn’t really want to know.

“I think that’s for the best,” Mimi agreed.

It was probably some sort of egg. The egg of something that made Mimi really uncomfortable. *Yeah, ignorance is bliss this time.*

“Is that all of the weird stuff?” I asked, afraid of what might remain.

“Yes,” Mimi said. “The rest is rather inoffensive.”

It turned out she was right. I enjoyed some of that cartoon meat on the bone from before, fruit I’d never seen that sat in neat little tarts, fish flakes, black jerky, and fried shrimp the size of my pointer finger. Incidentally, the shrimp and the black marbles had also been placed in front of me.

“Oh, what delicious-looking shrimp! Elma, try it out!” I said.

“Bwuh?!” Elma’s long ears perked up, but she hesitated. Was shrimp considered strange here? “Umm… It would be kinda rude to eat before you, right?”

“Ha ha ha! Don’t be modest. C’mon, here comes the choo-choo train.”

“Ulp.”

You won’t escape me.

As it turned out, shrimp wasn’t that weird, but we weren’t eating *shrimp*. Nope. Those things I thought were shrimp were actually some kind of caterpillar. Still tasted creamy and delicious, but suddenly I understood Elma’s reluctance.

***

All the food now identified, we enjoyed the feast before us. The girls also enjoyed their booze, though as usual, I abstained.

“Ah ha ha ha!”

“Master Hiro, c’mooon…”

“He had the gall to say I was too late to help!” Serena shouted, belligerent. “Well, *excuse* me for destroying a pirate base and cleaning up the remains! You’re the one stationed at the colony, so why don’t you protect it yourself?!”

Send help. Elma drowned herself in alcohol while Mimi clung to me and tugged at my clothing. All the while, Serena ranted about her unfair lot in life.

“Now, now, Serena. Calm down,” I said.

“And you!” Serena slurred. “You go around with your power armor defending the port, killing off a whole bunch of monsters on your own, rescuing Inagawa’s hospital, and then they make nanomachines to kill the rest! Do you know all the complaints I heard? ‘Oooh, the mercenary helped us out more than your squad.’ That’s why I told you I was going to be away! Why don’t *you* all use your soldiers better, huh?! It’s your fault that bioterrorism happened in the first place! Ugh!” Serena snatched my collar and yanked, flinging her pent-up rage at me. I couldn’t stand hearing her drunk-logic lectures, but they were inevitable from the moment she took her first sips.

“Oh, um… Calm down. Deep breaths.”

“Grrrr…” She growled but eased up on my collar.

“Uh. You okay?” I said.

Serena did not respond except to collapse right there on the table, fast asleep.

“Does she not realize she’s unconscious on a man’s ship?” I said. “That’s pretty reckless, if you ask me.”

“Heh heh heh.” Elma smirked. “Wanna do it?”

“Stop making those gross hand gestures at me, you drunk elf.” Elma prodded the index finger of one hand through a loop made by her index and thumb on the other hand. You know the gesture. “If I wanted to get off, I’d rather do it with someone who’s drunk but awake than with someone who’s unconscious.”

“Urk?!” That blew the dumb smirk right off of Elma’s face. *Heh. Now that’s what I wanted to see.*

Rather than keep teasing, I eased Mimi off of me and set her down on the couch. Then I scooped up Serena, bridal-style.

“Whoa. So you *are* gonna do it?” Elma said.

I grinned mischievously at her question and let out a “Yeet!” as I chucked Serena right into the medical pod. I didn’t have a death wish, so of course I didn’t desire any kind of drunken fling with a woman like Serena. She’d come roaring back with a marriage certificate or something, demanding I take responsibility. And what if her parents heard about this? I’d disappear without a trace—and fast.

“Huh? Back already? What, you couldn’t get it up?” Elma teased.

“You turn into a hell of a potty mouth when you’re drunk.” I bopped Elma on the head.

“Wow. Why do you get to act so big?” Elma said. “You know you’re head over heels for us. Once you peel back the surface layer, you’re one heck of a beast.”

“I can’t refute that,” I said. “Every man knows that he’s got a beast deep inside him. It’s pretty hard to hold that beast back with restraint alone, y’know.”

“Oh, jeez,” Elma groaned. “Do you think you sound cool?”

“Aww, what’s wrong? Does someone want attention?” Her schoolyard jabs were cute, but I saw right through the act. “Okay, fine. Wanna drink together? I’m not going to drink alcohol, though.”

“Pssh. Little baby.” Elma poured uncarbonated soda into a cup and offered it to me with a smile.

Guess it’s time to keep this lonely little rabbit company for a while.

***

“Urgh…”

“You always get carried away and drink too much.”

About an hour after I tossed Serena into the medical pod, our lovely elf had also collapsed after taking too many shots. This time, it was Elma I carried into the med bay. Hopefully, Serena had sobered up and I could simply switch them out.

Serena was still dozing in the medical pod. Her vitals were clear, though, so I nudged her awake. She blinked, looking lost for an instant before she jolted upright…

“Gack?!”

…and smashed her head against the glass lid of the medical pod. *Lieutenant Commander, I can’t help but notice that, despite you being completely sober, you’re still silly as heck.* I helped her get the pod open. Clearly, she wasn’t going to manage it from the inside right now.

“Just get out. I’ve gotta put Elma in.”

“Y-yes, sir.”

Serena climbed out, rubbing her head, and I set Elma down in her place.

“Umm…?” She still looked confused.

“You drank too much and started spewing all your insecurities like a punctured can of compressed oxygen,” I said. “Then, you passed out, so I

had to put you in that medical pod. And now here we are."

Serena blushed, her gaze flitting away. "Erm, I'm very sorry."

"Hey, there's nothing wrong with letting your hair down once in a while," I said. "You seemed a little stressed, after all."

I figured she would feel awkward. Imagine storming into someone's ship and begging for attention with no regard to how much of a nuisance you were. Then you drink until you don't even know who you are anymore, pass out, and wake up in a medical pod. Any sane person would be ashamed by a tempestuous blunder like that.

"Ngh…" Serena covered her face with both hands.

"This is the second time!" I pointed out.

"Urk!"

"You either need to be more careful with your drinking or have them put nanomachines in you to deal with your drunkenness. Either way, you can't just get on a mercenary ship and get drunk off your ass. You could end up in a really dangerous situation, especially for a person with your status."

I had to imagine that mind control existed in a universe this advanced. Someone could cut her tendons or toss her on a ship and drag her far away, wherever they liked. Hell, if I wanted to take her to the Belbellum Federation and sell her off, I could have. A young, beautiful noble would go for good money there.

"I regret my actions," Serena mumbled. She slumped down, pouting. Perhaps it was just an act, but I couldn't help thinking how adorable she looked like this. *Remember, this is Lieutenant Commander Serena here. Fully sober Serena. Is she really that remorseful? Maybe, maybe not.*

"Well, as long as you learn from it," I said. "I mean, I'm not in much of a position to lecture someone like you, anyway." I recovered Serena's sword, which was leaning against the wall, and returned it to her. "You should probably get back to your ship. I don't think either one of us wants people spreading crazy rumors."

"I-Indeed. You're right." She accepted her sword and rose to her feet.

As for Mimi, I found her cleaning up when I returned to the cafeteria. Out of all of us, it was the youngest member of this ragtag bunch who

actually showed the most self-control.

I saw Serena off, but she turned to me just before exiting the ship.

“Will we meet again?” she asked.

“If you keep hunting pirates, then yeah, I imagine we will,” I said. “They’re how I put food on the table. Besides, you owe me.” Maybe I was a bit of a hotshot when it came to slaughtering pirates, but I’d rather be that than a pirate sympathizer.

“Do I?” Serena said. “I suppose I do. Goodbye, then.”

“Yep. Later.”

Lieutenant Commander Serena left with a little smile. I sighed, shaking my head as I returned to the Krishna.

“Will we meet again? Really?” God, why’d she have to hit me with that kind of line while looking at me with those big puppy-dog eyes? What was I supposed to do?! She was way too much to handle, but I suspected fate would thrust us together again before long.

Epilogue

OUR PARTY DIDN'T DEPLETE our resources enough to delay us. The food and drinks had mostly been from Elma's and Mimi's personal stashes. Still, our little feast had proven to be a tiring affair. When I got up the next morning, the girls were still asleep, so I went right to training, bathing, and enjoying some coffee while I scoured for information.

I wasn't searching for info on our next destination, though; I was digging for intel on the bioterrorist attack. It seemed those pale monsters really were made from the cultured meat plant's life-forms. Genetic manipulation had caused their aggressive behavior and protected them from the fail-safe that should have killed them the moment they left the plant.

A group calling themselves the Association for the Protection of Artificial Life, or APAL, stepped up and took credit for the attack. The imperial government already had their sights set on destroying the organization. They were like some twisted version of an animal rights group, bent on using any means necessary—including violence—to protect the rights and lives of artificial life-forms created by humans for things like food production. I definitely didn't want to get entangled with them.

Inagawa Technologies sent me a reward for protecting the hospital and researchers, along with a fancy and suspiciously heavy fruit basket. They even hid a bit of Rare Metal beneath the treats. Either way, I wasn't going to sue them. It just seemed like a pain, y'know?

"Good morning, Master Hiro."

"Mornin'."

I'd just finished reading an article on the whole incident when Mimi and Elma entered the cafeteria.

"Morning, girls. How about we have some breakfast and get going?"

Elma rolled her eyes. "Think we'll be interrupted again?"

"I can't imagine Lieutenant Commander Serena will come around again today," I said.

Mimi tried to smile sweetly, but there was an edge to her grin. It seemed her image of Serena as a troublemaker was solidified now.

"It'll be fine," I assured them. "It's not like we're in a hurry anyway. One or two days' delay isn't a big deal." It would increase our docking costs, but considering we had over 17,000,000 Ener (1.7 billion Japanese yen), that wouldn't really make a dent in our funds. "Hey, let's eat! What does the Steel Chef have in store for us today?"

Elma rubbed her belly. "I need a big meal."

"I'm fine with something light," Mimi said. "Mornings don't get the belly rumbling for me."

Even on the morning of our departure, we enjoyed a comfortable and lively breakfast together as usual.

***

"Mimi, launch request," I said.

We jetted off toward the Cierra System the moment we finished breakfast. Serena's Pirate Hunting Unit was prowling this system, leaving few morsels for us to clean up. It was time to move on to greener pastures.

"Understood!"

"Keep doing what you do, Elma."

"Gotcha, boss. I'll take care of the subsystems."

With the ship's status green all around, Mimi announced our exit. "We've received permission to launch."

"Awesome. Let's go," I said.

We released our docking from the hangar bay, brought in the landing gear, and slowly shuttled out of the colony. It paid to be cautious when leaving such a crowded and busy place. One little accident could result in a fortune in repairs to my ship, the other ship, and the colony itself, not to mention reparations. I wasn't looking to go bankrupt.

“Um, it seems we’ll be third out of the gate,” Mimi informed me. “After that yellow container ship right there.”

“Aye-aye.” High-traffic colonies like this had to manage queues of ships in order to prevent disasters. Being just third in line actually meant this was a quiet day around here.

“We’re next,” Mimi told me.

“I’ll drive nice and careful until we’re out of the colony.”

“Yes, sir.”

“I’d hate to be stuck in an accident in front of the gate,” Elma said with a thousand-yard stare, presumably haunted by such an incident.

I reduced my shields to minimal output to avoid interfering with other ships, but that meant a collision would be even more dangerous. Before long, the yellow ship ahead of us made its escape. It was our turn.

“All right. We’re good to go, Master Hiro.”

“Got it.”

I proceeded cautiously, passing through the airtight shield that divided the colony from outer space. The barrier allowed ships through but not air or air pressure, a truly miraculous invention of this universe.

Finally, we passed through the shield and entered the wide-open expanse of space. I raised the generator output to maximum, and we left the colony behind.

“Mimi, ready navigation.”

“Yes, sir. Routing now.” With a few taps on her console, Mimi fed me the information I needed to navigate to our destination.

“Begin charging faster-than-light drive.”

“Understood,” Elma said. “FTL countdown incoming. Five, four, three, two, one. Activating FTL drive.”

Boom! A familiar bang thundered through the space around us as stars soared past our windows.

“Our destination is the Pamoni System, about four hyperlane exits away from the Cierra System,” I announced. “Okay, Elma, start charging

hyperdrive!”

“Charging hyperdrive.”

“Successfully connected to hyperlane,” Mimi told us.

“Counting down,” Elma said. “Five, four, three, two, one… Hyperdrive activated.”

Space warped, the starlight melting into streaks. A torrent of stars roared around us as the kaleidoscopic colors of hyperspace whirled.

“Well, we oughta be able to take things easy for a while,” I said.

The autopilot could steer us through hyperspace. It was especially helpful for long journeys, though it was always a good idea to have someone around in case of emergencies, or so Elma told me.

In *Stella Online*, hyperdrive journeys happened in a blink. I mean, how crappy would the game be if you had to wait hours to travel? It was a simple matter of activating hyperdrive, jumping into a lane, and bam! You’re there.

“What should we do about keeping watch?” I asked.

“Erm, do we actually need to?” Mimi cocked her head in puzzlement, as if she’d been wondering about it for a while.

“I dunno. I did it because Elma told me to, but I can’t actually explain why we’d need to. Really, I’m not sure about it myself. There are functions to correct autopilot when it starts malfunctioning, and we can set an alarm if we need to.” I looked over to Elma.

She nodded. “Yeah, that was a lie.”

“Huh?” Mimi gasped.

“For real?” I said.

“I mean, since we’re left with nothing to do for so long…y’know? It’s nice to have time alone together sometimes.” Elma averted her eyes in embarrassment. *Oh, I see. That’s why she insisted on someone keeping watch. Sneaky, Elma.*

“Okay. No keeping watch from now on, then?”

“Er, hold on a sec.”

“We just need to work together, right?” I said. “There’s no reason to set up pointless shifts and mess up people’s sleep. Sounds silly to me.”

“Y-yeah, maybe, but…”

“Come on. What’s wrong with us being a little degenerate?”

“Are you serious?” Elma glared at me.

Hey, what can I say? I was a simple man, and this was every simple man’s fantasy. It wouldn’t actually change much. We were already crammed together on this tiny ship for hundreds of hours. Plus, what else was there to do during hyperdrive? We couldn’t get network reception to carry out research. This was pure leisure time: videos, games, e-books, training, eating, bathing, et cetera. Overall, it was horribly boring. But with two or more consenting adults around, well, there might be a nicer way to pass the time, if you know what I mean. I could see why people of the past had had so many kids.

“Okay, girls, job’s done. As captain, I declare that you’re free to do as you please.”

“Understood,” Mimi said.

“Ugh,” Elma groaned. “Are you for real right now?”

“Hey, c’mon,” I said. “It’s a long trip, so let’s take it easy. Mimi, do you have any sights you want to see in the Cierra System?”

“Yes, absolutely!”

“Then let’s take a look in the cafeteria,” I said. “I’d love to know more about that resort galaxy. Elma, let’s go.”

“H-hey, hold up! Stop pushing me!”

I dragged Elma along into the cafeteria, determined that we would all kick back and relax for the first time since we’d entered the unfortunate Arein System. Good riddance.

Afterword

THANK YOU FOR BUYING *Reborn as a Space Mercenary*'s second volume. Again, quite the title, isn't it?!

Hi there. I'm Ryuto. It's getting cold out there. I'd love to hibernate like the bear I am, but things seldom go the way we want. Oh, what a cruel world!

So it's Volume 2. Volume 2, woo! I did it!

ComicWalker has begun a manga adaptation of this series! Shunichi Matsui's renditions of the Krishna, the colonies, our lovely heroines… Man, you've just gotta see it. By the way, the ship comes before the women due to my own personal tastes. I'm telling you, it's wonderful.

I'm sure you don't care much about my circumstances other than that, so let's get to talking about the book! I'm living a modest life with my beloved dog, by the way.

Anyway, here's the second edition of me talking about things I couldn't talk about in the book! This time, we'll discuss non-human races on other planets. They come up for a moment in this volume. As you can see, there are many non-human races in this universe.

One representative would be the Elma we know and love; she's an elf. Like humans, elves have used technology to leave their home planet and have mastered interstellar travel all on their own.

There are also dwarves, with their small but muscular bodies and skilled hands; reptilians, who have evolved from common reptiles; wolves who walk on two legs, known as lycanthropes; and even humanlike creatures with everything from cat ears to woolly bodies, like Chewbacca.

Non-humanoid races also exist. For example, there are jellyfish-like aliens, tentacle-like aliens, plant-like aliens, and much, much more. Imagine if our heroes ran into a certain pink, all-consuming monster… Scary!

I'd love to write about the various cultural exchanges between some of these races. Space is vast, so wouldn't it be boring if we only met

humanoids? Let's be disgusted by their strange customs, and let's disgust them with *our* strange customs. Don't be picky; live a little and broaden those horizons!

Now, it hurts to say goodbye, but I think it's about time we did so. Thank you to my manager, K; Tetsuhiro Nabeshima, our illustrator; and everyone involved in the publication of this book. Most of all, a huge thank-you to everyone who bought and read this book.

Let's meet again in Volume 3! C'mon, Volume 3! See ya!

—RYUTO

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ryuto

A brown bear living in Hokkaido

My hobby is gaming. I have a wide range of tastes, but survival action and strategy games are my absolute favorites. I changed the carpet in my living room recently. It’s wonderful to bask in the sun with my dog. Shaking things up is nice once in a while.

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